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ARGOSY

GEOFFREY HOUSEHOLD

NEW STORY

Brides of Solomon

H. E. BATES

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ARGOSY

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Printed in England by PERCY BROTHERS, LTD., THE HOTSPUR PRESS, MANCHESTER, and published on the 10th of each month by THE AMALGAMATED PRESS, LTD, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London E.C.4. Registered for Transmission by Canadian Magazine Post. Subscription Rates: Inland, £1 13s. for 12 months, 16s. 6d. for 6 months. Overseas (except Canada), £1 11s. for 12 months, 15s. 6d. for 6 months. Canada, £1 8s. 6d. for 12 months, 14s. 3d. for 6 months. ADVERTISEMENT OFFICES: Tallis House, Tallis Street, London E.C.4. Sole Agents: Australasia, MESSRS. GORDON & GOTCH, LTD.; South Africa, CENTRAL NEWS AGENCY, LTD.; Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, MESSRS. KINGSTONS, LTD

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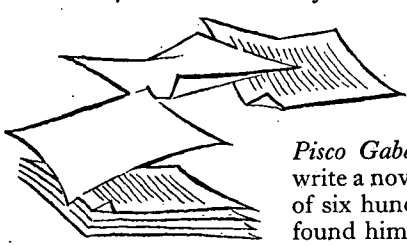
WATCH HIM AT WORK:

GEOFFREY HOUSEHOLD— DANGER WITH A DASH

GEOFFREY HOUSEHOLD looks, at deceptive first sight, like the English squire of fiction with a military past—until a puckish glint in his eye betrays the author of *Fellow Passenger* whose hero is discovered at different times in elephant-scented false whiskers and in lady metallurgists' bedrooms. The writer shares with his heroes a mixture of urbanity, irreverence, and a fondness for outdoor pursuits.

The Household family recently moved from Chiswick, when the departure of the two elder children to boarding-school and a constant stream of foundling cats on their notoriously cat-loving doorstep persuaded Geoffrey and his Hungarian wife to migrate to Buckinghamshire. They now live in a farmhouse, 1910 vintage, on seven acres of untamed land handsome with willows, poplars, chestnuts, and limes, and watered by numerous springs. In the two months since settling in they have cut down an acre or so of nettles and started excavating for a swimming-pool or fountain.

When Geoffrey Household left Oxford he had no particular intention of becoming an author. He enjoyed writing, but preferred to spend the next ten years working his way round Europe and the two Americas; he was in his middle thirties, and between two jobs, when Atlantic Monthly accepted his *Salvation of Pisco Gabar* and encouraged him to write a novel. With an assured income of six hundred a year from writing he found himself plunged into a new and



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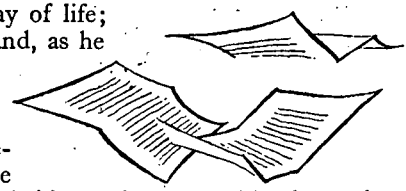
not altogether welcome way of life; success had grabbed him and, as he put it, discovering himself to be someone, he just had to go on with it.



Since then, with a five-year interval of wartime intelligence work, he has probably put in more writing hours than many a deskbound office worker. He writes to schedule—ten till one, five till seven every day. Of these periods the latter is immeasurably the more productive; perhaps, he says, this has some connection with his having been born late in the day. Whatever the reason, it is a great hindrance to family life, and he often wishes to heaven that he could be like Dickens or Trollope and dispose of his writing before breakfast.

His plots are mostly triggered off by conversation, anecdotes, chance remarks of friends—to snare his fancy an episode must have some flavour of irony or humorous twist. He finds nothing so stimulating as an intelligent, entertaining person who has led an interesting life. A good dinner—or even a very bad one—is more fruitful of ideas than the Press, supposedly the novelist's goldmine.

Plot in mind, he settles down to an exacting period of writing and rewriting, producing between seven hundred and a thousand words a day. This part, he says, is hell. The way in which a story is told may have to be altered two or three times before he is satisfied. (*Brides of Solomon*, his witty new one, was rewritten about five times in all.)

His novels are nearly always written in first-person narrative. This form, regarded by many writers as a crippling handicap, Household finds almost essential for removing the novelist's hazard of the shifting viewpoint. He objects to the "god's-eye view" as unnatural, but says that for him, unless his story is firmly tethered to a narrator, it is difficult not to slip into the thought-stream of some character who has hitherto been observed strictly from the outside. This fault in technique, probably invisible to the average reader, is a profound irritation to the professional eye.

Who is Household writing for? Partly to please himself, more specifically for an imaginary stockbroker, an intelligent, well-educated fellow who wants to be entertained and will not say thank you for excursions into psychiatry or flights into foreign languages. The results of

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this skilled and arduous work are novels with a highly individual blend of romance, adventure, compassion, and dry wit, and stories combining rapid action with a paprika-dash of irony. Much influenced by English eighteenth-century novelists, Household shares with them a total disregard for the dignity of his heroes, who are flung into every kind of tight corner, amorous, political, or, as in *Rogue Male*, just plain tight.

He never deliberately studies backgrounds, merely uses the resources of a well-stocked memory; his descriptive passages are written with maximum economy and effect.

His writing is particularly admired by painters and artists who appreciate the almost tactile qualities of his scenes, whether he writes of Holborn Underground Station, a Brazilian *estancia*, the chapter-house of an English cathedral, or the inside of a fractionating-column.

His ambition is to produce an absolutely first-rate picaresque novel, in the tradition of Fielding and Defoe; not precisely a thriller, but depending for its suspense mainly on pace, and containing both an entertaining commentary on contemporary life *and* plenty of excitement. He has not yet fixed on the central theme; it could, he says, be either love, money, or the fear of death. As he finds it hard to outrage probability by keeping his characters out of bed till the end of the book, fear of death seems the likeliest choice.

It will be a book worth looking out for.

JOHN SILVER

WISHING OUR READERS
ALL GOOD THINGS FOR CHRISTMAS

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A PATRICK PETRELLA STORY

DEEP AND CRISP AND EVEN

The week before Christmas things had been quiet enough . . .

BY MICHAEL GILBERT

EVENTUALLY, therefore, Detective Sergeant Petrella spent most of Christmas Day in bed with influenza and a rocketing temperature, and it was well on in the New Year before he reported back for duty. And during the uncomfortable nights, while the disease sweated itself out and the patient slept and woke and slept again, one face seemed to dominate his imagination; a face at once strong and ruthless, touched by a dangerous humour, but unrelieved by any other weakness.

It started a week before Christmas, when Superintendent Haxtell went on seven days' special leave. Things were quiet enough. Quieter than usual, perhaps, because Chief Superintendent Barstow had at last been moved and his successor not yet appointed. A policeman's troubles do not all come from below.

The snow lay deep on North London that December. People were busy buying Christmas presents, laying in unusual quantities of food and drink, hanging holly over pictures and mistletoe in the front hall, devising excuses to prevent their in-laws coming to stay, and generally behaving exactly like everybody else all over the civilized world—except Scotland where, as is well known, is celebrated a curious deviationist festival known as Hogmanay.

Crime followed the seasonal pattern. A little shop-lifting in the crowded shops by day. A marked increase in brawling as the public houses stayed open for an extra half-hour to celebrate the season of goodwill; and the ever-present problem of people who went away and left their houses unguarded and at the mercy of housebreakers, who recognize no close season.

In Petrella's experience, the average Highside householder, on leaving for a few days in the country, omitted to inform the milkman—so that a lengthening line of milk bottles might clearly

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mark his house for preferential treatment—deposited his valuables handily arranged in unlocked cupboards, and was careful to leave a scullery window ajar.

On Haxtell's departure, Petrella came nominally under Detective Inspector Finch, at the adjacent Sub-station in Bridge Road, but that excellent officer was busy with his own affairs and happy to leave Petrella alone until he asked for help.

After a day or two of nervous attention to his enlarged command, Petrella felt easier. By Christmas Eve, indeed, he felt relaxed enough to accept an invitation from his old friend, the Reverend Philip Freebone, to join a carol-singing party.

The Reverend Philip Freebone, the curate of the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, Highside, was an earnest and energetic young man, and, within the limitations of their different temperaments, the closest thing to a real friend that Petrella possessed. They met at the Boys' Club, well wrapped in coats, scarves, and gloves, and there they were issued with a carol book apiece, a storm lantern among six, and last-minute instructions.

"Take your time from me," said the Reverend Freebone. "All sing the same carol, and stop when I tell you. If they don't open the door at the end of the first verse we'll be wasting our time. Maurice"—*this to a particularly angelic-looking member* of the Harrington family—"you can hold the collecting-box. Remember to smile when you hold it out, and say Merry Christmas. The bottom's screwed on, by the way. All ready?"

Two hours later, their collecting-box full and their feet cold, they headed up the driveway of The Firs.

"There's a new man here, a Mr. Hazel. I believe he's a solicitor. His predecessor always used to give us a hot drink and a pound note. I hope this one'll co-operate. Oh dear! It looks as if he's out."

"It's just that the curtains are very well drawn. There's a light on in the dining-room," said Petrella. "I can see a chink."

"We'll give him *Silent Night*. That ought to wake him up. Plenty of support from the tenor and bass, please."

The choir let itself go.

"One more verse."

A light went up in the hall, the door opened, and a middle-aged man peered out. "Very nice," he said. "Very nice indeed. I wonder if you'd all care to come inside and have a drink?"

"Why, how very kind of you," said the Reverend Freebone. "If you're sure we're not trespassing on your hospitality?"

"Not at all. I'm afraid I've only got the one room in use at the moment. But I'm sure we can find something for all of you. Come along, come along."

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He led the way into the dining-room. A big electric fire was burning at one end of it, but it could not have been long switched on, for the room, even on coming into it from the night air, struck cold. However, their host was soon bustling about, opening cupboards and unearthing bottles.

"I *think* there's some ginger beer in the larder," he said. "Whisky for you, sir, or would you rather have rum? There are some biscuits in that box. No, my mistake. They're figs. Here are the biscuits."

Soon the room was warming up, and by the time the second drink had gone round, toes were thawing. Petrella, who was professionally interested in all who came to live in Highside, took unobtrusive stock of Mr. Hazel.

He noted a man of about fifty, large but not flabby, with a shrewd eye and a masterful mouth. He had the look of a lawyer; a lawyer who had seen perhaps, some active service during the war.

"We really must be getting along now," said the Reverend Freebone. "It's been very kind of you."

"Not at all," said their host. "A seasonable duty. Oh—that's the collecting-box you're waving at me, is it?"

"Really, Maurice!"

"See if you can squeeze this in." A pound note was folded and inserted into the box, and then the party were trooping out into the snow.

Back at the church hall the box was opened and the proceeds were counted.

"Nineteen pounds twelve and sixpence, a ten-franc piece, and an Irish shilling. That's nearly four pounds better than last year. Well sung, everybody. And well done, Maurice—only I don't think you should have stuck Mr. Hazel up quite so blatantly. We must have drunk more than a pound's worth of his whisky as it was."

"That wasn't Mr. Hazel," said Maurice.

"What do you mean?"

"I know Mr. Hazel. He's on my paper round. He's older an' he wears glasses."

Petrella and the Reverend Freebone looked at each other.

"Well, whoever he was," said the Reverend Freebone, "he behaved very handsomely. Put your carol books in that cupboard, and the lanterns go on the shelf. Who do you think—"

But Petrella was already on his way. An uneasy suspicion had crept into his mind. However recently a man had taken over a house, would he really not know where the drinks were, and whether a box contained figs or biscuits?

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He found Station Sergeant Rampole on duty in front of a roaring stove.

"Let's just have a look at the Notified Away List," he said.

Almost the first item that jumped out at him was: *A. E. Hazel, The Firs, Crown Road.* And in the remarks column, *Touring.*

Petrella hesitated for a moment, and then, realizing that seconds might count, he banged his hat back on his head and took to his heels. Sergeant Rampole stared after him. He took a fatherly interest in Petrella's welfare, and suspected that he had been overworking.

Petrella covered the distance to the front door of The Firs in two minutes and a half. The trampled footprints of the choir were visible in the snow. But superimposed on them was a new track: the track of car wheels. No light showed now from the chink between the curtains.

Petrella knocked, first softly, then loudly. He also rang the bell. The house remained silent and unresponsive. He walked round towards the back. The garage stood set back to one side of the house, and the fresh car tracks that he had noticed came from it. The doors were a-swing and the garage was empty.

It was all of a piece. A burglar with the nerve to entertain the choir to drinks could certainly use the garage to shelter his car.

Behind the garage the surface of the snow was unbroken, save for one double line of footprints leading towards the back quarters. Treading carefully to one side of them, Petrella followed. They led him to the kitchen door, which was shut.

He pressed, and with a click the door swung open. His torch showed him that the metal cup retaining the flange of the lock was hanging by a single screw. The slightest pressure unseated it and allowed the door to open.

He tried the light switch. The light came on all right. The kitchen was empty and had the tidy look of a room that was not in use. The stove was out, and the house was as cold as a mausoleum. He turned the light off and relied on his torch.

The dining-room was a little warmer, with the lingering heat of the electric fire that had been turned on for their benefit earlier in the evening. He looked around him. There were two obvious places for the household silver. A sideboard with drawers and a big oak corner cupboard. Covering his hand carefully with a handkerchief, Petrella opened the cupboard. It was empty. As also was the sideboard.

Petrella left the house, pulling the backdoor shut behind him, and made his way to the police station.

"Have you got any way of tracing Mr. Hazel?" he asked.

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Sergeant Rampole studied the list. "Touring," he said. "That's a fat lot of use. And he's new round here. So he hasn't had time to make a lot of friends." He scratched his head. "He's a solicitor, isn't he? We could look him up in the list and find his office. They might know where he's gone."

"Of course," said Petrella. "I'll do that in the morning." He was angry with himself for not thinking of such an obvious solution. There must be something wrong with him. He came to the conclusion that he was tired.

"There's another thing," he said. "What's the name of the little man we use to take off locks—Protheroe—could you get hold of him and ask him to put a new lock on the backdoor of The Firs?"

The Sergeant looked surprised. "Some trouble down there?"

"That's just it," said Petrella. "I don't know."

That night, for the first time for as long as he could remember, he slept badly. A face kept coming between him and his rest. A strong, sardonic face. The eyes seemed to be laughing at him, but the mouth was hard.

Next morning he located, without difficulty, the New Square firm of Marsham, Pratt, & Bailliwick of which Mr. Hazel was the senior partner; but such information as he got was vague and unhelpful.

"He never leaves any address when he goes on holiday," said the junior partner, a cheerful young man with an H.A.C. tie and a rather less conventional style of dress than would have been tolerated in Lincoln's Inn before the war. "If he does, he says we shall all be ringing him up with damned silly questions about his clients. And we should, too."

Petrella thanked him politely, and withdrew.

That was Christmas Eve. As he came out into Chancery Lane the snow was coming down again, thick, slow-falling, enduring flakes, dropping from a steel-grey sky onto a blanched and shrinking world.

When he got back to the Station, Sergeant Rampole reported that Protheroe had duly fixed a new lock on the backdoor of The Firs. Protheroe didn't think that the old lock had been forced; it had just got like that.

"Some people," said Sergeant Rampole, "bloody well deserve to have their houses burgled." When Petrella didn't answer, he looked up. The younger man was standing in front of the charge-room stove, his eyes shut. "You all right?" said the Sergeant.

"Funny," said Petrella. "I blacked out for a moment. I expect it was coming in here out of the cold."

"If I was you, I'd take a hot whisky and go to bed."

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"Can't do that," said Petrella. "Too much to do. I'll be all right."

There was, in fact, work. He had a couple of visits to make immediately after lunch, in the residential area south of Helenwood Common. He didn't seem to have any appetite, so he lunched off a cup of strong tea, and then he set out. The snow had stopped falling and the clouds had cleared away. With their passing, some of his depression had gone too, and he felt a sort of delusive light-headedness.

As he came out from his second visit, he saw the man. Petrella was half hidden by the doorway of the house he was in, and was certain he had not been seen. The man was on the opposite pavement, walking slowly. Hungrily Petrella studied his face. There was no doubt about it. It was his host of the previous evening; walking easily, despite his bulk, and with something of the swing of one who had once been an athlete.

As innocent-looking as a family cat, thought Petrella, and perhaps as dangerous.

He followed cautiously. The big man was in no hurry; and since this was Petrella's home ground, and he knew every inch of it, he was able to anticipate his route, sidestep, circle round, and cut back in such a way that he kept on the heels of his quarry without ever seeming to follow him at all.

After about a quarter of an hour of this blindfold chess Petrella realized, with a prickle of excitement, where they were heading. It was the Clarendon Estate, the houses of the top Highsiders, the rich and the influential; big houses, each in its own half acre of garden and with its private back gate onto the heath.

The big man walked slowly up the approach. He made no attempt to disguise his interest. He might have been a benevolent tiger viewing a line of tethered goats. When he reached the end he stopped, tried a front gate, found it open, and walked in. As soon as he was out of sight Petrella pelted after him, his footsteps muffled in the piled snow. Apart from the two of them there was no one else in sight.

He reached the gate in time to see the big man disappearing round the corner of the house.

"He can't—!" thought Petrella. "He can't—not in broad daylight!"

A board caught his eye, almost hidden in the snow-capped hedge: TO LET FURNISHED. Petrella stood undecided. The thing was to get under cover. But where? All the other houses looked horribly occupied. And the road was bare of cover. The solution suddenly occurred to him.

He opened the front gate, darted down the path, and dodged

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behind the line of laurel shrubbery that masked the point where the path turned round to the back of the house. It was not as thick as he could have wished, but it was better than nothing.

Three minutes. Five minutes. The silence of the late afternoon brooded over the snow.

Then, quite suddenly, the big man was there again. He had gone right round the house and was now moving, unhurried as ever, towards the spot where Petrella crouched. Unconsciously Petrella bent lower, and at that moment he knew he was slipping. There was nothing he could do about it. Not without grabbing one of the branches, and that would certainly give him away. He did the only thing possible. He let himself fall back, as softly and as slowly as he could, into the piled snow that filled the shallow dip behind him.

As he lay there, he heard the click of the front gate. And by the time he had rolled over, stumbled to his feet, and reached the end of the path, the roadway was empty.

Petrella himself retained little recollection of how he spent the rest of that day. Sergeant Rampole says that he came back to the Station, told him a long and involved story about having a fight in the snow with Father Christmas, and walked straight out of the room in the middle of the sentence without shutting the door. Mrs. Catt says that he came in looking like death, and she sent him to bed with a hot-water bottle. Later she took up his supper, found him fast asleep, and took it down again.

It was late the next morning when Petrella woke up. He had to think hard for a moment to remember that it was Christmas Day. He was bathed in sweat, but his head was a bit clearer. It was a beautiful day. The sun had come out, and was shining in glory on the fresh snow that had fallen during the night.

He felt curiously weak as he put on his clothes; and, although he had eaten nothing for nearly twenty-four hours, he was unhungry. He was not due at the Station until after lunch, so he decided to go to church.

There was always a good congregation at the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, and on this fine Christmas morning the church was likely to be full. Ahead of Petrella two family parties, prayer books in hand, filled the pavement. As they turned into Rochester Road, a man fell in behind them.

Impossible to say where he had come from. One moment the pavement was empty, the next moment he was there.

Petrella felt himself going red. A moment later they had both turned in at the porch of the Church of St. Peter and St. Paul.

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His friend, Mr. Peggs, was there, solemn in suit of Sunday black. He handed Petrella a prayer book and a hymn book and said, "Not much room downstairs. Why don't you grab yourself a seat in the gallery?"

Like many London churches, St. Peter and St. Paul had broad galleries across the back and two-thirds of the way down the sides; they were thrown open on festal occasions.

"Get a good view from there," said Mr. Peggs.

Petrella hesitated. Through the glass doors he could see his quarry. He was being shown to a single empty seat, at the inner end of the sixth row. He said abruptly, "Could you get a note to the Reverend Freebone? Before the service starts?"

Mr. Peggs looked at him for a moment, his eyes snapping with curiosity. "I'm meant to be on duty," he said. "I take it it's important."

"Yes," said Petrella. "Most important." It seemed to him, at that moment, the most important thing in the whole world.

"All right. I don't suppose they'll court-martial me."

Petrella was already scribbling: *He's sitting in the sixth row, on the south side, at the inner end of the row. If you or any of the choir recognize him* . . . What were they going to do? He had to know by the end of the service. Some action had to be taken. *Find some way of letting me know. I shall be in the north gallery, near the front.*

Petrella climbed the steep stone stair. The organ voluntary was reaching its climax as he slid into his seat. He peered over the parapet, felt unaccountably dizzy, and sat back hastily on his seat. The organ gave a final flourish, the big west doors swung open, and as the choir appeared, led by the People's Warden with staff in hand, the strains of *Adeste Fideles* broke from the massed voices below.

As the boys walked in solemn procession towards the altar they passed within inches of the big man. No head—not even an eye—turned. But Petrella knew. It was as clear to him as if it had been shouted. As clear as when, during the course of the service, head after head turned up from the choir to where he sat, clinging with hot hands to the gallery parapet.

"I'd better let him get outside," thought Petrella. "But he mustn't get away again. I'll walk to the end of the path, and tackle him as he comes out into the street. Always supposing I can get down those stairs. Something seems to have gone wrong with my legs." The whole scene below him had broken adrift, and was floating on the surges of the solemn organ music, now rising, now falling, now circling in stately dance around that central figure to which his eyes were fastened.

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Petrella rose to his feet as the service finished, and tottered down the stairs. A man looked up at him curiously as he cannoned into him, but said nothing. Then he was outside and heading for the lich-gate.

"I'll do it here," he said. The stout oak gate-post was something to lean against in a reeling world, which suddenly steadied as he saw three figures walking together towards him, down the path. In the middle was the man he was waiting for. On his right, a tall grey-haired stranger, wearing glasses. On his left—Petrella blinked twice—Superintendent Haxtell.

"There *is* Petrella," said Haxtell. "I thought I saw him lurking in the gallery. Let me introduce you. Mr. Hazel you know, I think. And this is Chief Superintendent Causton. He's taking over Barstow's job."

The big man smiled. "I haven't had time to make myself known," he said. "I've been here unofficially for some days, house-hunting. Mr. Hazel let me base myself on him."

Petrella found himself shaking hands.

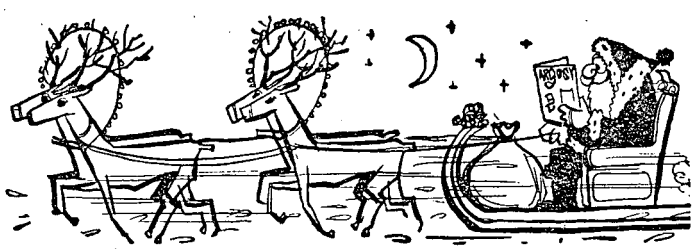
"Sergeant Rampole gave me a bad report of you," said Haxtell. "He says you've been overworking. You don't look awfully fit."

"I've got a car here," said Mr. Hazel. "Look here—I think we'd better give him a hand."

The whole white world was rotating slowly round Petrella's head. He felt a strong hand under each arm, and then he was in a car. "It's very good of you," he said feebly.

"Hazel owes you that, at least," said Chief Superintendent Causton, turning round from his seat by the driver. "It's a small exchange for that handsome lock you put on his backdoor. Invitation to burglars, leaving his house in that condition."

Mr. Hazel laughed. The Chief Superintendent smiled, too. It was a smile that implied, perhaps, more than it stated. Or so Petrella thought. But he was in no real condition at that moment for logical thinking.



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GHOST TRAIN

BY LAWRENCE DURRELL

I LIKE Edmunds. I can't really say why—I think it is because he takes everything so frightfully seriously. He is portentous—always dropping into a whisper, clicking his tongue, pursing his lips, turning the palms of his hand outwards and making " what-would-you " gestures.

We've served together in a number of foreign capitals, he as a member of the diplomatic, I as a contract officer. Whenever I'm in London he gives me lunch at his club and we talk about the past—those happy days passed in foreign capitals " lying abroad " for our country.

The Ghost Train episode (said Edmunds) was a bit before your time. I only mention it because I can think of nothing which illustrates the peculiar hazards of Diplomatic Life so well. In fact it throws them into Stark Relief.

Every nation has its particular idée fixe. For the Yugoslavs it is trains.

Nothing can compare for breathtaking romance with the railway train. Railway engines have to be put under armed guard when not in motion or they would be poked to pieces by the inquiring peasantry. No other object arouses the concupiscence of the Serb like a train.

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This year's prize for versatility might well go to Lawrence Durrell, who has produced in rapid succession a bestselling novel, "Justine," a vivid account of schoolmastering in Cyprus, "Bitter Lemons," and now "Esprit de Corps," a high-spirited offshoot of his own experiences as press officer in the Foreign Service. From this amusing collection, Argosy presents a riotous glimpse of the "Dip Corps" in rather violent transit.

They drool over it, old boy, positively drool.

You twig this the minute you alight from the Orient Express at Belgrade because there is something queer about the station building itself. It leans to one side. It is neatly cracked from platform level to clock tower.

Moreover there are several distinct sets of ruts in the concrete of the platform which are highly suggestive.

The first porter you engage will clear up the mystery. Apparently every fifteenth train or so leaps the buffers, grinds across the freight section, and buries itself in the booking-office. No one is ever hurt and the whole town joyfully bands together to dig the engine out.

Everyone is rather proud of this particular idiosyncrasy. It is part of the Serbian Way of Life.

Well, being aware of this as I was, I could not help being a bit concerned when Nimic in the Protocol hinted that the Diplomatic Corps was to be sent to Zagreb for Liberation Day in a special train which would prove once and for all that the much-vaunted

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Yugoslav heavy industry was capable of producing machinery every bit as good as the degenerate Capitalist West. This tip was accompanied by dark looks and winks and all efforts to probe the mystery further proved vain. A veil of secrecy (one of the seven veils of Communist diplomacy) was drawn over the subject. Naturally we in the Corps were interested, while those who had served for some time in the Balkans were perturbed. "Mon dieu," said Du Bellay, the French Minister, gravely, "si ces animaux veulent jouer aux locos avec le Corps Diplomatique . . ." He was voicing the unspoken thoughts of many of us.

There was no further information forthcoming about the Ghost Train, as we jokingly called it, so we sat back and waited for Liberation Day. Sure enough the customary fat white envelope appeared ten days before from the Protocol. I opened mine with a troubled curiosity. It announced that the Corps would be travelling by a Special Train which would be placed at its disposal. The train itself was called the Liberation-Celebration Machine.

Even Polk-Mowbray—Sir Claud Polk-Mowbray, O.M., K.C.M.G.—looked a bit grave. "What sort of Devil-Car do you think it will be?" he said apprehensively.

I couldn't enlighten him, alas. "It's probably a chain-drive Trojan with some carriages built around it in plywood."

There was a short-lived movement among the Corps to go by road instead and thus sidestep the Liberation-Celebration Machine but the Doyen put his foot down. Such a defection would constitute a grave slight. The Yugoslav heavy industry would be hurt by our refusal to allow it to unveil the marvels of modern science to us.

Reluctantly we all accepted. "Butch" Benbow, the naval attaché, who was clairvoyant and who dabbled in astrology, took the omens. Apparently they were not propitious. "All I can see is clouds of smoke," he said hoarsely, looking up from the progressed chart on his desk. "And someone gets a severe scalp wound—probably you, sir."

Polk-Mowbray started. "Now, look here," he said, "let's have no alarm and despondency on this one. If the Yugoslav heavy industry gives me even a trifling scalp wound I'll see that there is an International Incident over it."

The day drew inexorably nearer. The Special Train, we learnt, was to be met in a siding just outside Belgrade. There is a small station there, the name of which I forget. Here at the appointed time, which was dusk, we duly presented ourselves in full tenue. There were flowers and speeches by representatives

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of the Yugoslav heavy industry. Most of the representatives looked nearly as heavy as their industry. But I couldn't take my eyes off the train.

I'm not saying it was gaudy. It was absolutely breathtaking. The three long coaches were made of painted and carved timber; flowers, birds, liberation heroes, cache-sexes, emblematic devices, post-horns—everything you can imagine, all carved and painted according to the peasant fancy. The general effect was that of a Sicilian market-cart with painted and carved side-boards—or the poop of some seventeenth-century galleon. Every blacksmith, wheelwright, and cartwright in Serbia must have had a hand in it.

" C'est un chalet Tyrolien ou quoi? " I heard Du Bellay say under his breath. His scepticism was shared by us all.

We entered and found our reserved carriages, which seemed normal enough. The band played. We accepted a wreath or two. Then we set off in the darkness to the braying of donkeys and cocks and the rasping of trombones. We were off across the rolling Serbian plains.

Two things were immediately obvious. All this elaborate woodwork squeaked and groaned calamitously, ear-splittingly. How were we to get any sleep?

But more serious still was the angle of inclination of the second coach with the Heads of Mission in it. It was about thirty degrees out of centre and was only, it seemed, held upright by the one immediately before and behind it. It was clear that the Yugoslav heavy industry had mislaid its spirit-level while it was under construction. People who looked out of the windows on one side had the illusion that the ground was coming up to hit them.

I paid Polk-Mowbray a visit to see if he was all right and found him looking rather pale, and drawn up on the higher elevation of the coach like someone on a sinking ship. The noise was so great that we couldn't speak—we had to shout.

" My God," I heard him cry out, " what is to become of us all? "

It was a little difficult to say.

We were now gathering speed. The engine was a very old one. It had been abandoned before the war by an American film company, and the Yugoslavs had tied it together with wire. Its gaping furnace, which was white-hot, was being passionately fed by some very hairy men in cloth caps who looked like Dostoevsky's publishers. It seemed to me that the situation had never looked graver.

Despite its age, however, it had managed to whip up a good forty-five. And every five hundred yards it would groan and

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void a bucketful of white clinker into the night which set fire to the grass on either side of the track. From far off we must have looked like an approaching forest fire.

Another feature of the Liberation-Celebration Machine was an ingenious form of central heating which could not be turned off, and as none of the windows opened, the temperature inside the coaches rapidly mounted into the hundreds. People were fanning themselves with their tall hats.

Old man, never have I seen the Corps subjected to such a strain. Sleep was impossible. The lights would not turn off. The wash-basins appeared to empty into each other. And all the time we had the ghastly thought of all the Heads of Mission in the hanging coach, drinking brandy and gibbering with fright as we sped onwards through the night.

The chance of some frightful accident taking place was far from remote and consequently nobody was able to relax. We did not even dare to get into pyjamas but sat about in that infernal racket staring desperately at one another and starting at every regurgitation of the engine, every shiver and squeak of the coaches.

The American Ambassador was so overcome that he spent the night singing *Nearer My God to Thee.* Some said that he had had the forethought to take a case of rye into his compartment with him. Madame Fawzia, the Egyptian Ambassadress, spent the night on the floor of her compartment deep in prayer. I simply did not dare to think of Polk-Mowbray.

From time to time when the wind changed the whole train was enveloped in a cloud of rich, dense smoke containing fragments of half-digested coal the size of hailstones. But still the ghoulish crew in the engine-cab plied their grisly shovels and on we sped with mournful shrieks and belches.

At two in the morning there was a ghastly rending noise as we entered the station of Slopsy Blob, named after the famous Independence fighter. The hanging coach somehow got itself engaged with the tin dado which ran along the roof of the station and ripped it off as clean as a whistle, by the same token almost decapitating one of the drivers. The noise was appalling and the whole Corps let out a unified shriek of terror.

I have never heard diplomats scream like that before or since—and I never want to. A lot of cherubs and floral devices were ripped off the hanging coach in the encounter and the people in the rear coaches found themselves assailed by a hail of coloured fragments of wood which made them shriek the louder. It was all over in a moment.

Then we were out in the night once more racing across the

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dark plain, the Brothers Karamazov still plying the engine with might and main. It is possible that, in the manner of Serbs, they had heard nothing. We spent the rest of the night in sleepless vigil, old man. The guardian angel of the Yugoslav heavy industry must have been with us, for nothing much worse happened. But it was a pretty dispirited and shaken Dip Corps that was finally dragged into Zagreb Station on that Liberation morning. I can tell you, never was liberation so much in the forefront of everyone's thoughts.

It must have been about six o'clock when we stormed into Zagreb, squealing and blowing out an Etna of steam. The brakes had been applied some three miles outside the station, and their earsplitting racket had to be heard to be believed.

But this was not the end. Though we missed the red carpet by a quarter of a mile, and though the waiting dignitaries and the Zagreb Traction and Haulage Workers' Band padded down the platform after us, our troubles were not yet at an end. It was found that the doors of the coaches on the platform side were fast shut and could not be opened.

I suppose Zagreb Station must have been on the opposite side of the track from Belgrade Station and consequently nobody dreamt that we should need more than one exit from the train. It was, of course, fearfully humiliating.

We leaned against the windows making inarticulate gestures of goodwill and vague grimaces in the direction of the Traction Haulage Workers' Band and the Liberation Reception Committee. We must have looked like a colony of dispossessed fairground apes pining for the old life of the trees.

After a good deal of mopping and mowing there was nothing for it but to climb out of the Zagreb Flyer onto the permanent way and walk round the train to the reception point. This we somewhat shamefacedly did. But when all was said and done it was good to feel terra firma under our feet once more.

Drawn up in order of precedence on Zagreb platform, we submitted to the Liberation anthem sung by the Partisan choir in a register so low that it could not drown the merry cries of self-congratulation with which the Karamazov brothers were greeting the morn. Their observations were punctuated by blasts of hot steam and whiffs of sound from the whistle of the Liberation-Celebration Machine which looked even more improbable in the cold morning light than it had done the evening before.

All this went off as well as such things can be expected to do; but, sleepy as we were, a sudden chill struck our hearts at a phrase in the Speech of Welcome which plainly indicated that the authorities expected us to make the return journey in the Liberation-

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Celebration Machine on the following day. This gave us all food for thought.

Madame Fawzia made an involuntary retching noise which was interpreted by our hosts as an expression of joy. Several other ladies in the Corps showed a disposition to succumb to the vapours at this piece of intelligence.

But the old training dies hard. There was many a tight lip and beady eye but not a word was said until we were assembled for breakfast in the card room of the Slopsy Blob Hotel. Then the pent-up floodwaters of emotion overflowed. Ambassadors, Ministers, Secretaries of Embassy, and their wives began as one man to gesticulate and gabble. It was a moving scene.

Some called upon the gods to witness that they would never travel by train again; others spoke wonderingly of the night they had just spent when the whole of their past life flashed before them as if on a screen; the wife of the Spanish Republican Minister, by far the most deeply shaken by events, fell upon the Doyen, the Polish Ambassador, and named him as responsible before God for our safety and well-being.

It was an interesting study in national types. The Egyptians screamed, the Finns and Norwegians snarled, the Slav belt pulled at each other's lapels as if they were milking goats. The Greeks made Promethean gestures at everyone—they could afford to take the balanced view since they had already hired the only six taxis in Zagreb and were offering seats for the return journey at a thousand dinars each.

One thing emerged clearly from all this. The Corps was in a state of open mutiny and would not easily be persuaded to entrain once more with the Brothers Karamazov.

The Doyen pleaded in vain. We struck various national attitudes all round the room. The Italian Ambassadress, who looked as if her anger would succeed in volatilizing her, went so far as to draw up her dress and show the company a bruise inflicted on her during the journey. As for Polk-Mowbray, he did indeed have a scalp wound—an egg-shaped protuberance on the crown of his head where he had doubtless been struck by a passing railway station.

It was clear that the journey had aged him.

Well, that day most of us spent the time in bed with cold compresses and aspirin. In the evening we attended a performance of the Ballet, and a Torchlight Tattoo. Liberation Day was at an end. That night the Doyen convened another meeting in the hotel at which he harangued us about diplomatic procedure in general and our obligations to the Service in particular.

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In vain. We were determined not to travel back on the Ghost Train.

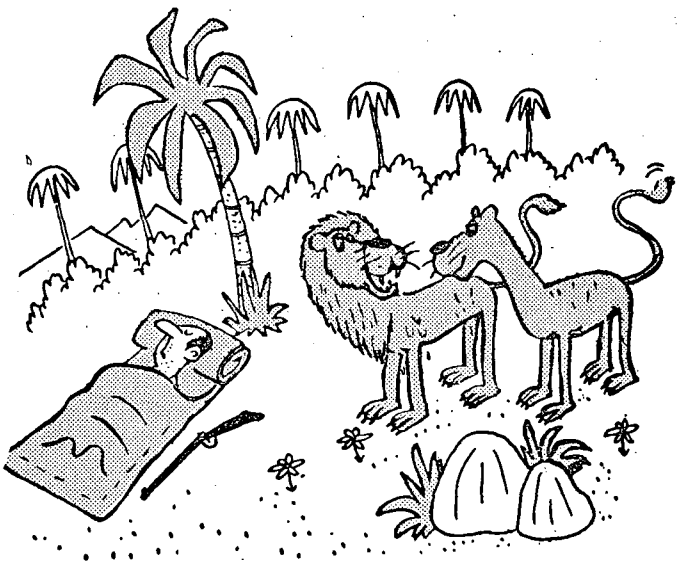
He pleaded with us but we were adamant. That evening a flock of telegrams fluttered into the Protocol Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs—telegrams pleading sudden illness, pressure of work, unforeseen political developments, migraine, influenza, neuritis or events beyond the writer's control.

At dawn a convoy of taxis set out on the homeward track bearing the shattered remnants of the Corps, unshaven, unhonoured, but still alive, still breathing . . .

In a way I was sorry for the Brothers Karamazov and the Liberation-Celebration Machine. God knows, one did not wish them ill. But I must confess I was not surprised to read in the paper a week later that this latest triumph of the Yugoslav heavy industry had jumped the points at Slopsy Blob and finished the good work it had begun by carrying away most of the station buildings.

No one was hurt. No one ever is in Serbia. Just badly shaken and frightened out of one's wits.

It is all, when you come to think of it, part of the Serbian Way of Life . . .



" There you are, dear—breakfast in bed ! "

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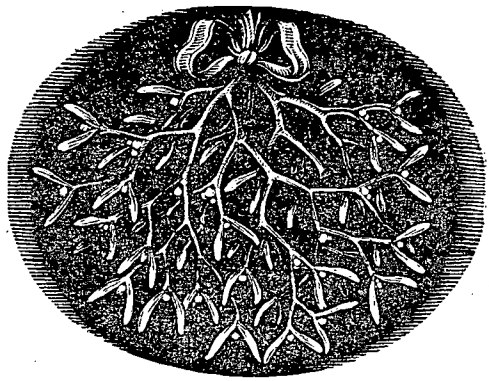

A Bunch of Holly

The mistletoe hung in the castle hall,
The holly branch shone on the old oak wall

THOMAS HAYNES BAYLY,
The Mistletoe Bough

Now the holly bears a berry as white as the milk,
And Mary bore Jesus, who was wrapped up in silk:
And Mary bore Jesus Christ our Saviour for to be,
And the first tree in the greenwood, it was the holly,
Holly! holly!
And the first tree in the greenwood it was the holly.

Now the holly bears a berry, as blood is it red,
Then trust we our Saviour, who rose from the dead:
And Mary bore Jesus Christ our Saviour for to be,
And the first tree in the greenwood, it was the holly,
Holly! holly!
And the first tree in the greenwood it was the holly.

Cornish Carol

What she was carrying was a Christmas tree, quite a little tree, the eighteenpenny size, but such a *radiant* little tree! It was glittering and twinkling with all the prettiest fantasies in glass that the mind of Christmas had been able to invent, little gas lamps and candlesticks, shining balls of every colour, a scarlet-and-

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silver Father Christmas, also in glass, chains and festoons of gold and silver beads, stars, and flowers, and long clear drops like icicles; birds, too, in glass, blue and yellow birds, seeming to fly, and one, proudest and loveliest of all, a peacock, shimmering in blue and green and gold, with a crest and long, long tail of fine spun glass, like silk.

ELEANOR FARJEON, *The Glass Peacock*

On this white day
Of winter in our land
The holly spray
Shall blossom in your hand.

A child's small breath
All silver in the frost
Shall let you smile at death,
All love not lost.

JOHN PUDNEY,
Carol in a Time of Doubt

The Holly and the Ivy

There was plenty of holly; that is, there were plenty of berries on the holly trees, which is all that ever matters about holly, and they enjoyed themselves hooking down the branches with a walking-stick brought for that purpose. The beech leaves lay in deep copper drifts in the hollows and the dark silver trunks towered solemnly upwards to the cold fading fairy light in the sky . . . Gradually their arms grew full of branches and sprays; trails of ivy with dark jade green leaves, the bright black berries of the honeysuckle, dim red rose-hips and the fans of the fir-tree.

STELLA GIBBONS, *The Bachelor*

Twelfth Night

Down with the rosemary, and so
Down with the bays and mistletoe;
Down with the holly, ivy, all
Wherewith ye dressed the Christmas Hall:
That so the superstitious find
No one least branch there left behind.

ROBERT HERRICK

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NOW SLEEPS THE CRIMSON PETAL

CLARA CORBETT, who had dark brown deeply sunken eyes that did not move when she was spoken to and plain brown hair parted down the middle in a straight thin line, believed that her life had been saved by a gas-cape.

In a single glittering, dusty moment a bomb had blown her through the window of a warden's post, hurling her to the street outside. The wind from the bomb had miraculously blown the cape about her face, masking and protecting her eyes. When she had picked herself up, unhurt, she suddenly knew that it might have been her shroud.

"Look slippy and get up to Mayfield Court. Six brace of partridges and two hares to pick up . . .

"And on the way deliver them kidneys and the sirloin to Paxton Manor. Better call in sharp as you go out. They're having a lunch party."

Every rainy day of her life, now, she still wore the gas-cape as she drove the butcher's van, as if half fearing that some day, somewhere, another bomb would blow her through another window, helplessly and for ever. The crumpled patterns of green-and-yellow camouflage always made her look, in the rain, like a damp, baggy, meditating frog.

Every day of his life, her husband, Clem, wore his bowler hat in the butcher's shop, doffing it obsequiously to special customers, revealing a bald, yellow, suet-shining head. Clem had a narrow way of smiling and argued that war had killed the meat trade.

Almost everyone else in that rather remote hilly country, where big woodlands were broken by open stretches of chalk

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BY H. E. BATES

heathland covered with gorse and blackthorn and occasional yew trees, had given up delivering to outlying houses. It simply didn't pay. Only Clem Corbett, who doffed his hat caressingly to customers with one hand while leaving the thumb of his other on the shop scales a fraction of a second too long, thought it worth while any longer.

"One day them people'll all come back. The people with class. Mark my words. The real gentry. They're the people you got to keep in with. The pheasant-and-partridge class. The real gentry. Not the sausage-and-scragenders."

Uncomplainingly, almost meekly, she drove out, every day, in an old delivery van with a basket or two in the back and an enamel tray with a few bloody, neat-wrapped cuts of meat on it, into wooded, hilly countryside. Sometimes in winter, when the trees were thinned of leaves, the chimneys of empty houses, the mansions of the late gentry, rose starkly from behind deep thick beechwoods that were thrown like vast bearskins across the chalk. In summer the chalk flowered into a hill garden of wild yellow rock-rose, wild marjoram, and countless waving mauve scabious covered on hot afternoons with nervous darting butterflies.

She drove into this countryside, winter and summer, camouflaged always by the gas-cape on days of rain, without much change of expression. Her meek sunken eyes fixed themselves firmly on the winter woods, on the narrow lanes under primroses or drifts of snow, and on the chalk flowers of summer as if the

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seasons made no change in them at all. It was her job simply to deliver meat, to rap or ring at kitchen doors, to say good morning and thank you and then to depart in silence, camouflaged, in the van.

If she ever thought about the woods, about the blazing open chalkland in which wild strawberries sparkled, pure scarlet, in hot summers, or about the big desolate mansions standing empty among the beechwoods, she did not speak of it to a soul. If the mansions were one day to be opened up again, then they would, she supposed, be opened up. If people with money and class were to come back again, as Clem said they would, once more to order barons of beef and saddles of lamb and demand the choicest cuts of venison, then she supposed they would come back. That was all.

In due course, if such things happened, she supposed Clem would know how to deal with them. Clem was experienced, capable and shrewd, good butcher and good business man. Clem knew how to deal with people of class. Clem, in the early days of business, had been used to supplying the finest of everything, as his father and grandfather had done before him, for house parties, shooting luncheons, ducal dinners, and regimental messes. The days of the gentry might, as Clem said, be under a temporary cloud. But finally, one day, class would triumph again and tradition would be back. The war might have half killed the meat trade, but it couldn't kill these people. They were there all the time, as Clem said, somewhere. They were the backbone, the real people, the gentry.

"Didn't I tell you?" he said one day. "Just like I told you. Belvedere's opening up. Somebody's bought Belvedere."

She knew about Belvedere. Belvedere was one of those houses, not large but long empty, whose chimneys rose starkly, like tombs, above the beechwoods of winter-time. For six years the army had carved its ashy, cindery name on Belvedere.

"See, just like I told you," Clem said two days later, "the gentleman from Belvedere just phoned up. The right people are coming back. We got an order from Belvedere."

By the time she drove up to Belvedere, later that morning, rain was falling, heavily, sultrily warm, on the chalk flowers of the hillsides. She was wearing the old gas-cape, as she always did under rain, and in the van, on the enamel tray, at the back, lay portions of sweetbreads, tripe, and liver.

High on the hills, a house of yellow stucco frontage, with thin iron balconies about the windows and green iron canopies above them, faced the valley.

"Ah, the lady with the victuals! The lady with the viands.

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The lady from Corbett, eh?" A man of forty-five or fifty, in shirtsleeves, portly, wearing a blue-striped apron, his voice plummy and soft, answered her ring at the kitchen door.

"Do come in. You are from Corbett, aren't you?"

"I'm Mrs. Corbett."

"How nice. Come in, Mrs. Corbett, come in. Don't stand there. It's loathsome and you'll catch a death. Come in. Take off your cape. Have a cheese straw."

His face of rosy flesh was smeared with flour dust. His fattish soft fingers were stuck about with shreds of dough.

"You arrived in the nick, Mrs. Corbett. I was about to hurl these wretched things into the stove, but now you can give judgment on them for me."

With exuberance he suddenly put in front of her face a plate of fresh warm cheese straws.

"Taste and tell me, Mrs. Corbett. Taste and tell."

With shyness, more than usually meek, her deep brown eyes lowered, she took a cheese straw and started to bite on it.

"Tell me," he said, "if it's utterly loathsome."

"It's very nice, sir," she said.

"Be absolutely frank, Mrs. Corbett," he said. "Absolutely frank. If they're too revolting say so."

"I think—"

"I tell you what, Mrs. Corbett," he said, "they'll taste far nicer with a glass of sherry. That's it. We shall have a glass of pale dry sherry and see how it marries with the cheese."

Between the sherry and the cheese straws and his own conversation she found there was not much chance for her to speak. With bewilderment she watched him turn away, the cheese straws suddenly forgotten, to the kitchen table, a basin of flour, and a pastry board.

With surprising delicacy he pressed with his fingers at the edges of thin pastry lining a brown shallow dish. Beside it lay a pile of pink peeled mushrooms.

"This I know is going to be delicious," he said. "This I am sure about. I adore cooking. Don't you?"

Speechlessly she watched him turn to the stove and begin to melt butter in a saucepan.

"Croûte aux champignons," he said. "A kind of mushroom pie. There are some things one knows one does well. This I love to do. It's delicious—you know it, of course, don't you? Heavenly."

"No, sir."

"Oh, don't call me sir, Mrs. Corbett. My name is Lafarge. Henry Lafarge." He turned to fill up his glass with sherry, at

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the same time fixing her with greyish bulbous eyes. "Aren't you terribly uncomfortable in that wretched mackintosh? Why don't you throw it off for a while?"

The voice, though not unkindly, shocked her a little. She had never thought of the gas-cape as wretched. It was a very essential, useful, hard-wearing garment. It served its purpose very well, and with fresh bewilderment she pushed it back from her shoulders.

"Do you think I'm a fool?" he said. "I mean about this house? All my friends say I'm a fool. Of course it's in a ghastly state, one knows, but I think I can do things with it. Do you agree? Do you think I'm a fool?"

She could not answer. She felt herself suddenly preoccupied, painfully, with the old brown dress she was wearing under the gas-cape. With embarrassment she folded her hands across the front of it, unsuccessfully trying to conceal it from him.

To her relief he was, however, staring at the rain. "I think it's letting up at last," he said. "In which case I shall be able to show you the outside before you go. You must see the outside, Mrs. Corbett. It's a ravishing wilderness. Ravishing to the point of being sort of almost Strawberry Hill. You know?"

She did not know, and she stared again at her brown dress, frayed at the edges.

Now, outside, the rain had stopped and only the great beeches overshadowing the house were dripping. The sauce for the croûte aux champignons was almost ready, and he dipped a little finger into it and then thoughtfully licked it, staring at the same time at the dripping summer trees.

"I'm going to paint most of it myself," he said. "It's more fun, don't you think? More creative. I don't think we're half creative enough, do you? Stupid to allow menials and lackeys to do all the nicest things for us, don't you think?"

Pouring sauce over the mushrooms, he fixed on her an inquiring, engaging smile that did not need an answer.

"Now, Mrs. Corbett, the outside. You must see the outside."

Automatically she began to draw on her gas-cape.

"I can't think why you cling to your gas-cape, Mrs. Corbett," he said. "The very day war was over I had a simply glorious ceremonial bonfire of all those things." Suddenly, and for the first time, she could not think why she wore the gas-cape either.

In a cindery garden of old half-wild roses growing out of matted tussocks of grass and nettle, trailed over by thick white horns of convolvulus, he showed her the southern front of the house with its rusty canopies above the windows and its delicate iron balconies entwined with blackberry and briar.

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" Of course at the moment the plaster looks frightfully leprous," he said, " but it'll be pink when I've done with it! The sort of pink you see in the Mediterranean. You know? "

A Virginia creeper had enveloped with shining tendrilled greed the entire western wall of the house, descending from the roof in a dripping curtain of crimson-green.

" The creeper is coming down this week," he said. " Ignore the creeper." He waved soft pastry-white hands in the air, clasping and unclasping them. " Imagine a rose there. A black one. An enormous deep red-black one. A hat rose. You know the sort? "

Again she realized he did not need an answer.

" The flowers will glow," he said, " like big glasses of dark red wine on a pink tablecloth. Doesn't that strike you as being absolute heaven on a summer's day? "

Bemused, she stared at the tumbling skeins of creeper, at the rising regiments of sow-thistle, more than ever uncertain what to say. She began hastily to form a few words about it being time for her to go when he said: " There was something else I had to say to you, Mrs. Corbett, and now I can't think what it was. Terribly important too. Momentously important."

A burst of sunshine falling suddenly on the wet wilderness, the rusting canopies and the frog-like gas-cape seemed abruptly to enlighten him. " Ah—hearts," he said. " That was it."

" Hearts? "

" What's today? Tuesday. Thursday," he said, " I want you to bring me one of your nicest hearts."

" One of my hearts? "

He laughed, again not unkindly. " Bullock's," he said.

" Oh! Yes, I see," she said.

" Did you know," he said, " that hearts taste like goose? Just like goose-flesh? " He stopped, laughed again, and actually touched her arm. " No, no. That's wrong. Too rich. One can't say that. One can't say heart's like goose-flesh. Can one? "

A stir of wind shook the beech boughs, bringing a spray of rain sliding down the long shafts of sunlight.

" I serve them," he said, " with cranberry sauce. With fresh peas, fresh new potatoes, no one can tell the difference."

They were back now at the kitchen door, where she had left her husband's basket on the step.

" We need more imagination, that's all," he said. " The despised heart is absolutely royal, I assure you, if you treat it properly—"

" I think I really must go now, Mr. Lafarge," she said, " or I'll never get done. Do you want the heart early? "

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"No," he said, "afternoon will do. It's for a little evening supper party. Just a friend and I. Lots of parties, that's what I shall have. Lots of parties, little ones, piggy ones in the kitchen, first. Then one big one, an enormous house-warmer, a cracker, when the house is ready."

She picked up her basket, automatically drawing the gas-cape round her, and started to say, "All right, sir. I'll be up in the afternoon—"

"Most kind of you, Mrs. Corbett," he said. "Good-bye. So kind. But no 'sir'—we're already friends. Just Lafarge."

"Good-bye, Mr. Lafarge," she said.

She was halfway back to the van when he called, "Oh, Mrs. Corbett! If you get no answer at the door you'll probably find me decorating." He waved soft, pastry-white hands in the direction of the creeper, the canopies, and the rusting balconies. "You know—up there."

When she came back to the house late on Thursday afternoon, not wearing the gas-cape, the air was thick and sultry. All along the stark white fringes of chalk, under the beechwoods, yellow rock-roses flared in the sun. Across the valley hung a few high bland white clouds, delicate and far away.

"The creeper came down with a thousand empty birds' nests," he called to her from a balcony. "A glorious mess."

Dressed in dark blue slacks, with yellow open shirt, blue silk muffler, and white panama, he waved towards her a pink-tipped whitewash brush. Behind him the wall, bare of creeper, was drying a thin blotting-paper pink in the sun.

"I put the heart in the kitchen," she said.

Ignoring this, he made no remark about the gas-cape, either. "The stucco turned out to be in remarkably good condition," he said. "Tell me about the paint. You're the first to see it. Too dark?"

"I think it's very nice," she said.

"Be absolutely frank," he said. "Be as absolutely frank and critical as you like, Mrs. Corbett. Tell me exactly how it strikes you. Isn't it too dark?"

"Perhaps it is a shade too dark."

"On the other hand one has to picture the rose against it," he said. "Do you know anyone who grows that wonderful black-red rose?"

She stood staring up at him. "I don't think I do."

"That's a pity," he said, "because if we had the rose one could judge the effect— However, I'm going to get some tea. Would you care for some tea?"

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In the kitchen he made tea with slow, punctilious, ritual care.

"The Chinese way," he said. "First a very little water. Then a minute's wait. Then more water. Then another wait. And so on. Six minutes in all. The secret lies in the waits and the little drops of water. Try one of these. It's a sort of sour-milk tart I invented."

She sipped tea, munched pastry, and stared at the raw heart she had left in a dish on the kitchen table.

"Awfully kind of you to stop and talk to me, Mrs. Corbett," he said. "You're the first living soul I've spoken to since you were here on Tuesday."

Then, for the first time, she asked a question that had troubled her.

"Do you live here all alone?" she said.

"Absolutely, but when the house is done I shall have masses of parties. Masses of friends."

"It's rather a big house for one person," she said.

"Come and see the rooms," he said. "Some of the rooms I had done before I moved in. My bedroom for instance. Come upstairs."

Upstairs a room in pigeon grey, with a deep green carpet and an open french window under a canopy, faced across the valley.

He stepped out on the balcony, spreading enthusiastic hands. "Here I'm going to have big plants. Big plushy ones. Petunias. Blowzy ones. Begonias, fuchsias, and that sort of thing. Opulence everywhere."

He turned and looked at her. "It's a pity we haven't got that big black rose."

"I used to wear a hat with a rose like that on it," she said, "but I never wear it now."

"How nice," he said, and came back into the room, where suddenly, for the second time, she felt the intolerable dreariness of her brown woollen dress.

Nervously she put her hands in front of it again and said, "I think I ought to be going now, Mr. Lafarge. Was there something for the weekend?"

"I haven't planned," he said. "I'll have to telephone."

He stood for a moment in the window, looking straight at her with an expression of arrested, sharp amazement.

"Mrs. Corbett," he said, "I saw the most extraordinary effect just now. It was when I was on the ladder and we were talking about the rose. You were standing there looking up at me and your eyes were so dark that it looked as if you hadn't got any. They're the darkest eyes I've ever seen. Didn't anyone ever tell you so?"

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No one, as she remembered it, had ever told her so.

The following Saturday morning she arrived with oxtail and kidneys. "I shall have the kidneys with sauce madère," he said. "And perhaps flambés."

He was kneading a batch of small brown loaves on the kitchen table, peppering them with poppy seeds, and looked up from them to see her holding a brown-paper bag.

"It's only the rose off my hat," she said. "I thought you might like to try—"

"Darling Mrs. Corbett," he said. "You dear creature."

No one, as she remembered it, had ever called her darling before. Nor could she ever remember being, for anyone, at any time, a dear creature.

Some minutes later she was standing on the balcony outside his bedroom window, pressing the dark red rose from her hat against the new-pinked wall. He stood in the cindery wilderness below, making lively, rapturous gestures.

"Delicious, my dear. Heavenly. You must see it. You must come down!"

She went down, leaving the rose on the balcony. A few seconds later he was standing in her place while she stood in the garden below, staring up at the effect of her dark red rose against the wall.

"What do you feel?" he called.

"It seems real," she said. "It seems to have come alive."

"Ah! but imagine it in another summer," he said. "When it *will* be real. When there'll be lots of them, scores of them, blooming here."

With extravagant hands he tossed the rose down to her from the balcony. Instinctively she lifted her own hands, trying to catch it. It fell instead in a forest of sow-thistle.

He laughed, again not unkindly, and called, "I'm so grateful, Mrs. Corbett. I really can't tell you how grateful I am. You've been so thoughtful. You've got such taste."

With downcast eyes, she picked the rose out of the mass of sow-thistle, not knowing what to say.

Through a tender August, full of soft light that seemed to reflect back from dry chalky fields of oats and wheat and barley just below the hill, the derelict house grew prettily, all pink at first among the beeches. By September, Lafarge had begun work on the balconies, painting them a delicate seagull grey. Soon the canopies were grey, too, hanging like half seashells above the windows. The doors and windows became grey also, giving an effect of delicate lightness to the house against the background of arching, massive boughs.

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She watched these transformations almost from day to day as she delivered to Lafarge kidneys, tripe, liver, sweetbreads, calves' heads, calves' feet, and the hearts that he claimed were just like goose-flesh.

"Offal," he was repeatedly fond of telling her, "is far too underrated. People are altogether too superior about offal. The eternal joint is the curse. What could be more delicious than sweetbreads? Or calf's head? Or even chitterlings? There is a German recipe for chitterlings, Mrs. Corbett, that could make you think you were eating I don't know what—some heavenly, melting manna. You must bring me chitterlings one day soon, Mrs. Corbett dear."

"I have actually found the rose too," he said one day with excitement. "I have actually ordered it from a catalogue. It's called Château Clos de Vougeot and it's just like the rose on your hat. It's like a deep dark red burgundy."

All this time, now that the weather had settled into the rainless calm of late summer, she did not need to wear the gas-cape. At the same time she did not think of discarding it. She thought only with intolerance of the brown frayed dress and presently replaced it with another, dark blue, that she had worn as second-best for many years.

By October, when the entire outside of the house had become transformed, she began to feel, in a way, that she was part of it. She had seen the curtains of creeper, with their thousand birds' nests, give way to clean pink stucco. The canopies had grown from bowls of rusty green tin to delicate half seashells and the balconies from mere paintless coops to pretty cages of seagull grey. As with the fields, the beechwoods, the yellow rock-roses running across the chalk, and the changing seasons she had hardly any way of expressing what she felt about these things. She could simply say, "Yes, Mr. Lafarge, I think it's lovely. It's very nice, Mr. Lafarge. It's sort of come alive."

"Largely because of you, dear," he would say. "You've inspired the thing. You've fed me with your delicious viands. You've helped. You've given opinions. You brought the rose for the wall. You've got such marvellous instinctive taste, Mrs. Corbett dear."

Sometimes too he would refer again to her eyes, that were so dark and looked so straight ahead and hardly moved when spoken to. "It's those wonderful eyes of yours, Mrs. Corbett," he would say. "I think you have a simply marvellous eye."

By November, the weather had broken up. In the shortening rainy days the beeches began to shed continuous golden-copper showers of leaves. Electric light had now been wired to the

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outer walls of the house, with concealed lamps beneath the balconies and windows.

She did not see these lights switched on until a darkening afternoon in mid November, when Lafarge greeted her with an intense extravagance of excitement.

"Mrs. Corbett, my dear, I've had an absolute storm of inspiration. I'm going to have the house-warmer next Saturday. All my friends are coming and you and I have to talk of hearts and livers and delicious things of that sort and so on and so on. But that isn't really the point. Come outside, Mrs. Corbett dear, come outside."

In the garden, under the dark, baring trees, he switched on the lights. "There, darling!"

Sensationally a burst of electric light gave to the pink walls and the feather-grey canopies, doors, windows, balconies, a new, uplifting sense of transformation. She felt herself catch her breath.

The house seemed to float for a moment against the half-naked trees, in the darkening afternoon, and he said in that rapturous plummy voice of his, "But that isn't all, dear, that isn't all. You see, the rose has arrived. It came this morning. And suddenly I had this wild surmise, this wonderful on-a-peak-in-Darien sort of thing. Can you guess?"

She could not guess.

"I'm going to plant it," he said, "at the party."

"Oh yes, that will be nice," she said.

"But that's not all, dear, that's not all," he said. "More yet. The true, the blushful has still to come. Can't you guess?"

Once again she could not guess.

"I want you to bring that rose of yours to the party," he said. "We'll fix it to the tree. And then in the electric light, against the pink walls—"

She felt herself catch her breath again, almost frightened. "Me?" she said. "At the party?"

"Well, of course, darling. Of course."

"Mr. Lafarge, I couldn't come to your party—"

"My dear," he said, "if you don't come to my party, I shall be for ever mortally, dismally, utterly offended."

She felt herself begin to tremble. "But I couldn't, Mr. Lafarge, not with all your friends—"

"Darling Mrs. Corbett. You *are* my friend. There's no argument about it. You'll come. You'll bring the rose. We'll fix it to the tree and it will be heaven. All my friends will be here. You'll love my friends."

She did not protest or even answer. In the brilliant electric

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light she stared with her dark diffident eyes at the pink walls of the house and felt as if she were under an arc-light, about to undergo an operation, naked, transfixed, and utterly helpless.

It was raining when she drove up to the house on Saturday evening, wearing her gas-cape and carrying the rose in a paper bag. But by the time she reached the hills she was able to stop the windscreen-wipers on the van and presently the sky was pricked with stars.

There were so many cars outside the house that she stood for some time outside, afraid to go in. During this time she was so nervous and preoccupied that she forgot that she was still wearing the gas-cape and only remembered it at the last moment, and then took it off and rolled it up and put it in the van.

Standing in the kitchen, she could only think that the house was a cage, now full of gibbering monkeys. Bewildered, she stood staring at trays of glasses, rows of bottles, many dishes of decorated morsels of lobster, prawns, olives, nuts, and sausages.

As she stood there a woman came in with a brassy voice, a long yellow cigarette holder, and a low neckline from which melon-like breasts protruded white and hard, and took a drink from a tray, swallowing it quickly before taking the entire tray back with her.

"Just float in, dear. It's like a mill-race in there. You just go with the damn stream."

Cautiously Mrs. Corbett stood by the door of the drawing-room, holding the rose in its paper bag and staring at the gibbering, munching, sipping faces swimming before her in smoky air.

It was twenty minutes before Lafarge, returning to the kitchen for plates of food, accidentally found her standing there, transfixed with deep immobile eyes.

"But, darling Mrs. Corbett! Where have you been? I've been telling everyone about you and you were not here. I want you to meet everyone. They've all heard about you. Everyone!"

She found herself borne away among strange faces, mute and groping.

"Angela darling, I want you to meet Mrs. Corbett. The most wonderful person. The dearest sweetie. I call her my heart specialist."

A chestless girl with tow-coloured hair, cut low over her forehead to a fringe, as with a basin, stared at her with large, hollow, unhealthy eyes. "Is it true you're a heart specialist? Where do you practise?"

Before she could answer, a man with an orange tie, a black shirt, and a stiff carrot beard came over and said, "Good lord,

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what a mob. Where does Henry get them from? Let's whip off to the local. That woman Forbes is drooling as usual into every ear."

Excuseless, the girl with hollow eyes followed him away. Lafarge too had disappeared.

"Haven't I seen you somewhere before? Haven't we met? I rather fancied we had." A young man with prematurely receding, downy yellow hair and uncertain reddish eyes, looking like a stoat, sucked at a glass, smoked a cigarette, and held her in a quivering, fragile stare.

"Known Henry long? Doesn't change much, does he? How's the thing getting on? The opus, I mean. The great work. He'll never finish it, of course. Henry's sort never do."

It was some time before she realized what was wrong with the fragile uncertain eyes. The young man spilt the contents of his glass over his hands, his coat, and his thin, yellow snake of a tie. He moved away with abrupt unsteadiness and she heard a crash of glass against a chair. It passed unnoticed, as if a pin had dropped.

Presently she was overwhelmed by hoglike snorts of laughter, followed by giggling, and someone said, "What's all this about a rose?"

"God knows."

"Some gag of Henry's."

A large man in tweeds of rope-like thickness stood with feet apart, laughing his hoglike laugh, steadying himself as he drank, and now and then thrusting his free hand under a heavy shirt of black-and-yellow check, scratching the hairs on his chest.

Drinking swiftly, he fell to whispering, "What's all this about Henry and the grocer's wife? They say she's up here every hour of the day."

"Good lord, Henry and *what* wife?"

"Grocer's, I thought—I don't know. You mean you haven't heard?"

"Good lord, no. Can't be. Henry and *girls*?"

"No? You don't think so?"

"Can't believe it. Not Henry. He'd run from a female fly."

"All females are fly."

Again, at this remark, there were heavy, engulfing guffaws of laughter.

"Possible, I suppose, possible. One way of getting the custom."

She stood in a maze, only half hearing, only half awake. Splinters of conversation went crackling past her bewildered face like scraps of flying glass.

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" Anybody know where the polly is? Get me a drink while I'm gone, dear. Gin. Not sherry. The sherry's filthy."

" Probably bought from the grocer."

Leaning against the mantelpiece, a long arm extended, ash dropping greyly and seedily down her breast, the lady with the yellow cigarette holder was heard, with a delicate hiss, to accuse someone of bitchiness.

" But then we're all bitches, aren't we," she said, " more or less? But she especially."

" Did she ever invite you? She gets you to make up a number for dinner and when you get there a chap appears on the doorstep and says they don't need you any more. Yes, actually! "

" She's a swab. Well, poor Alex, he knows it now."

" That's the trouble, of course—when you do know, it's always too bloody late to matter."

Everywhere the air seemed to smoke with white continuous explosions. She started to move away and found herself facing a flushed eager Lafarge, who in turn was pushing past a heavy woman in black trousers, with the jowls of a bloodhound and bright blonde hair neatly brushed back and oiled, like a man.

" There you are, Mrs. Corbett. You've no drink. Nothing to eat. You haven't met anybody."

A man was edging past her and Lafarge seized him by the arm.

" Siegfried. Mrs. Corbett, this is my friend Siegfried Pascoe. Siegfried, dear fellow, hold her hand. Befriend her while I get her a drink. It's our dear Mrs. Corbett, Siegfried, of heart fame." He squeezed Mrs. Corbett's arm, laughing. " His mother called him Siegfried because she had a Wagner complex," he said. " Don't move! "

An object like an unfledged bird, warm and boneless, slid into her hand. Limply it slid out again and she looked up to see a plump creaseless moon of a face, babyish, almost pure white under carefully curled brown hair, staring down at her with pettish, struggling timidity. A moment later, in a void, she heard the Pascoe voice attempting to frame its syllables like a little fussy machine misfiring, the lips loose and puffy.

" What do you f-f-f-feel about Eliot? " it said.

She could not answer; she could think of no one she knew by the name of Eliot.

To her relief Lafarge came back, bearing a glass of sherry and a plate on which were delicate slices of meat rolled up and filled with wine-red jelly. " This," he told her, " is the heart. Yes, your heart, Mrs. Corbett. The common old heart. Taste it, dear. Take the fork. Taste it and see if it isn't absolute manna. I'll hold the sherry."

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She ate the cold heart. Cranberry sauce squeezed itself from the rolls of meat and ran down her chin and just in time she caught it with a fork.

The heart, she thought, tasted not at all unlike heart and in confusion she heard Lafarge inquire, " Delicious? "

" Very nice."

" Splendid. So glad—"

With a curious unapologetic burst of indifference he turned on his heel and walked away. Five seconds later he was back again, saying, " Siegfried, dear boy, we shall do the rose in five minutes. Could you muster the spade? It's stopped raining. We'll fling the doors open, switch on the lights, and make a dramatic thing of it. Everybody will pour forth—"

He disappeared a second time into the mass of gibbering faces, taking with him her glass of sherry, and when she turned her eyes she saw that Siegfried Pascoe too had gone.

" What on earth has possessed Henry? They say she's the butcher's wife. Not grocer's after all."

" Oh, it's a gag, dear. You know how they hot things up. It's a gag."

She set her plate at last on a table and began to pick her way through the crush of drinkers, seeking the kitchen. To her great relief there was no one there. Suddenly tired, hopelessly bewildered and sick, she sat down on a chair, facing a wreckage of half-chewed vol-au-vent, canapés, salted biscuits, cold eyes of decorated egg. The noise from the big drawing-room increased like the hoarse and nervous clamour rising from people who, trapped, lost, and unable to find their way, were fighting madly to be free.

Out of it all leapt a sudden collective gasp, as if gates had been burst open and the trapped, lost ones could now mercifully find their way. In reality it was a gasp of surprise that Lafarge had switched on the outside lights, and she heard it presently followed by a rush of feet as people shuffled outwards into the rainless garden air.

Not moving, she sat alone at the kitchen table, clutching the paper bag. From the garden she heard laughter bursting in excited taunting waves. A wag shouted in a loud voice, " Forward the grave-diggers! On with the spadework! " and there were fresh claps of caterwauling laughter.

From it all sprang the sudden petulant voice of Lafarge, like a child crying for a toy, " The rose! Oh, my dear, the rose! Where *is* the rose? We can't do it without the rose."

Automatically she got up from the table. Even before she heard Lafarge's voice, nearer now, calling her name, she was

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already walking across the emptied drawing-room, towards the open french windows, with the paper bag.

"Mrs. Corbett! Mrs. Corbett! Oh, there you are, dear. Where *did* you get to? What a relief—and oh, you poppet, you've got the rose."

She was hardly aware that he was taking her by the hand. She was hardly aware, as she stepped into the blinding white light of electric lamps placed about the bright pink walls, that he was saying, "Oh, but, Mrs. Corbett, you must. After all, it's your rose, dear. I insist. It's all part of the thing. It's the nicest part of the thing—"

Vaguely she became aware that the rose tree, spreading five fanlike branches, was already in its place by the wall.

"Just tie it on, dear. Here's the ribbon. I managed to get exactly the right-coloured ribbon."

From behind her, as she stood under the naked light, tying the rose to the tree, she was assailed by voices in chattering boisterous acclamation. A few people actually clapped their hands and there were sudden trumpeted bursts of laughter as the wag who had shouted of grave-diggers suddenly shouted again, "Damn it all, Henry, give her a kiss. Kiss the lady! Be fair."

"Kiss her!" everyone started shouting. "Kiss her. Kiss! Kiss, Henry! Kiss, kiss!"

"Pour encourager les autres!" the wag shouted. "Free demonstration."

To a sudden burst of harsh, jovial catcalls, she turned her face away, feeling utterly naked and transfixed again under the stark white lights, and a second later she felt Lafarge's lips brush clumsily, plummily across her own.

Everyone responded to this with fresh loud bursts of cheers.

"Ceremony over!" Lafarge called out. He staggered uncertainly, beckoning his guests housewards. "Everybody back to the flesh-pots. Back to the grain and grape."

"Henry's tight," somebody said. "What fun. Great, the kissing. Going to be a good party."

She stood for some time alone in the garden, holding the paper bag. In an unexpected moment the lights on the pink walls were extinguished, leaving only the light from windows shining across the grass outside. She stood for a few moments longer and then groped to the wall, untied the rose and put it back in the paper bag.

Driving away down the hillside, she stopped the van at last and drew it into a gateway simply because she could think of no other way of calming the trembling in her hands. She stood for

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a long time clutching the side of the van. In confusion she thought of the rose on the wall, of hearts that were like goose-flesh, and of how, as Clem said, the gentry would come back. Then she took the gas-cape and the paper bag with its rose out of the van.

When she had dropped the paper bag and the rose into the ditch she slowly pulled on the gas-cape and started to cry. As she cried she drew the gas-cape over her head, as if afraid that someone would see her crying there, and buried her face in it, as in a shroud.

Christmas Eve

Red berry nor green leaf
Nor look of any flower
These high wide spaces
Inhabits, this bleak hour.
Glows in this solitude,
For glad reprieve,
Primrose nor pimpernel,
Red berry nor green leaf.

Here the divine flower
Of natural loves,
Growing in quietness
As a flower does,
Unfolds to ensyllable
The creative thought,
That a new word be spoken
And a new world wrought.

Now praise we and adore
This majesty of birth,
Whose every frail flowering
Brings heaven to earth,
And pray that from this hour
In all the sons of men
Christ his living charity
Be born again.

GERALD BULLETT

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GUEST OF THE EMPRESS

Wild rumours started to spread
in the red-gold pagodas of Peking

BY E. M. O'DONOVAN

ONE morning, in late October 1908, a curious little procession made its way through the narrow odorous lanes that lie between the legations and the Tartar City in Peking. A middle-aged Scotsman, in tweed suit and battered Panama hat, smoking a pipe, was being carried in a sedan chair, preceded by an outrider who brandished a curved and rusty sword. Behind, in a smart rickshaw, sat a Chinese gentleman, followed by coolies bearing a Gladstone bag, a dismantled easel, and a paintbox, slung on a bamboo pole.

The Scotsman was Thomas Hodgson Liddell, the only British artist ever to paint inside the Summer Palace as the guest of the Empress-Dowager Yehonala, known to millions of her subjects as Old Buddha.

Brilliant and ruthless, the Empress had been the virtual ruler of China for over half a century, during the reigns of three successive Emperors—her husband, her son, both weak and dissolute, and her nephew, whom, since he had plotted against her in 1898, she had kept confined in the Forbidden City. She hated the British, for they had twice caused her to flee from Peking; so it was not surprising that, on arrival in the capital, the Minister told Liddell that his request to enter and paint inside the Palace had been refused.

However, His Excellency Yuan-Shi-Kai had promised to approach the Empress personally. The proverb, " A request put forward empty-handed is not so easy as when the hand is full," was quoted, and a framed picture sent to the Grand Council for Old Buddha's acceptance.

Shortly afterwards the artist received a summons, inviting him to the Palace. " Sixth day of tenth moon in the thirty-fourth year of the reign of Kuan Hsu—Permission by Imperial Edict given to a British painter Li-Te-Erh (Liddell) to enter the Palace," etc., etc.

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Thus it was that Liddell, with his " boy " Wang, found himself being escorted to the Summer Palace, nine miles outside Peking.

Suddenly the chair-bearers deposited their load on the highway, and the little party and their baggage were transferred to ponies. The artist was not much of a rider, and when a firecracker exploded in front of his pony, he fell off into a ditch.

Mr. Chang was profuse in apologies. Some child had thrown it, he said; but, as he remounted, Liddell could hear murmurs of " foreign devil."

Soon they were heading west, meeting the long camel trains plodding disdainfully through the dust, with their bales of hides or baskets of coal. After a perilous canter, to the artist's relief, they came in sight of the temples and pagodas of the Summer Palace. The scene outside the marble gateway resembled a fairground, with jugglers and acrobats entertaining the swarming crowds. Mule-carts, bicycles, and rickshaws jostled the horse-carriages carrying the higher officials to the Court. At every point the walls were guarded.

Liddell was received by several mandarins, and shown his apartments. They were furnished with blackwood chairs and opium tables. A sentry stood on guard at the entrance, but windows opened on a courtyard with oleander trees.

After a meal of fat pork and eels, Mr. Chang suggested a walk in the grounds. The mandarins reappeared, and the artist realized he was not to be allowed to move without a retinue. They took it in turns to explain the various Halls and Temples until, at last, they came through a colonnaded terrace to the Sacred Lake.

It lay beneath them like a piece of azure silk, shot with pink by the setting sun, and patterned with water-lilies. On the hillside, among the autumn trees, the pavilions and pagodas, red-walled and encrusted with golden tiles, gleamed in the evening light.

" Go fetch, my makee picture, chop chop—hurry," the artist cried, and Wang ran off to get his painting-gear.

Dinner was brought to his apartments by two " boys," supervised by Wang, who, as he lit the oil lantern, explained that at the beating of the curfew drums he, with all other men, must leave the Palace till dawn, but Liddell would remain inside the walls, with the eunuchs guarding the Empress and the Imperial concubines. As he lay down on the floor-bed, a shadow passed the paper latticed door, and a hand slid the bolt across. He was locked in for the night!

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That week he painted the vermilion lacquer gate, the temples and halls, always accompanied by the mandarins. One night he was invited to dine with them, and Wang, feeling the shabby western clothes would be out of place, produced a long brocade gown and silk boots.

A number of eunuchs were present; they spoke no English and conversed in high sibilant tones. The meal began with tea, fruit, and sweets; from fifty different dishes, the artist sampled sea-slugs and deer sinews, finishing with birds'-nest soup, and wine. His hosts produced little pieces of paper from the tops of their boots, with which they wiped their lips and cleaned their chop-sticks.

Liddell, finding it difficult to imitate their reverberations of gastronomic satisfaction, turned to his neighbour, and asked whether there was any chance of seeing the Empress.

"The lizard on the rock might see the Dragon leaving the cave," came the enigmatic answer.

The next morning he went out in a boat to paint the Marble Junk. His picture, a large water-colour, was not quite finished when Mr. Chang suddenly ordered the coolies to row ashore.

"But it isn't finished," the artist expostulated. Mr. Chang did not seem to hear; he was watching a snake of yellow-robed priests approaching the private apartments of the Empress . . .

Liddell was changing for dinner when there came a tap on the door. It was Wang. "Tajen, master," he said excitedly, "must go tomorrow, my can pack master's bag?"

This, then, was his last evening, and tired, for he had been painting hard all day, he sat in the little courtyard, smoking a pipe under the oleander trees. Tonight the peace was broken; footsteps hurried up and down the endless corridors, and a loud wailing from the concubines' quarters was suddenly, inexplicably hushed.

At dawn Mr. Chang appeared, and told him to rise quickly and come with him to an aperture in the outer walls. Presently, to the sound of horns and beating of drums, a procession came through the main gateway, led by the Imperial Bannermen. A posse of Manchu cavalry, with pheasant feathers waving from their helmets, were followed by the concubines in their green-curtained chairs. Li Lien Yung, the notorious Chief Eunuch, stout and inscrutable, rode beside the golden chair carrying Old Buddha to the State Barge, in which she would travel by canal to Peking.

The royal chair passed, the waiting crowds abased themselves in the dust. There was nothing to be seen of Yehonala, only her hand was visible, waxen yellow, with its long jewelled nail

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shields, lying like five claws of a dragon, against the red brocade.

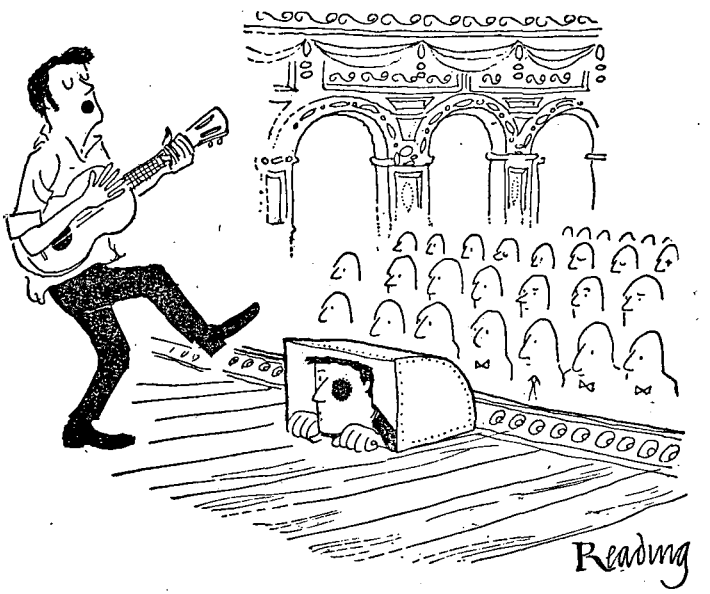
A week later, wild rumours ran spreading through the clubs and legations of Peking. The Emperor was dead! But how, by whose hand?

Was it poison, or the natural result of long captivity? A method favoured by the Empress for dispatching usurping princes was drowning down a well, but it was generally agreed that the Son of Heaven would have been allowed a more dignified exit.

At a farewell party given for the artist, a Chinese diplomat sent a note, apologizing for absence, and two journalists excused themselves before dinner was over. Old Buddha was dying. It was whispered that the Emperor's Pearl Concubine had managed to get access to the Imperial pantry, and avenged the death of her lord—but these were only rumours. The Press were told that she had eaten too freely of her favourite dish of crab-apples and cream. Then came the news of her death.

Had the end come in her Palace by the lake, and the secret been kept until the puppet-Emperor could precede her to the Yellow Springs of Death?

And was that waxen hand on the curtain, Liddell wondered, the hand of an Empress already dead?



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BRIDES OF SOLOMON

It was hard to find one tolerable woman
—let alone two hundred

BY GEOFFREY HOUSEHOLD

IN spite of heat, insects, and isolation, Don Felipe had made himself comfortable. He had two more years to serve in the Peruvian forest, administrating the head waters of the Madre de Dios, and every reason to believe that he would finish them with some remnants of health and a reputation as a reasonable man.

He preferred his cool office to the jungle. That, too, was reasonable. It was the first duty of a government servant to be easily and courteously accessible.

He was intimidated—though he did not for a moment show it—by the determined Diocesan Visitor who had so smoothly come up from the river. Father Hilario held himself most unnecessarily upright in the curves of his basket chair. He seemed to set an awkward standard not only for administrators of Indian territory but for the flowers and creepers which rioted over the patio and were so obviously and carelessly growing when compared with the rigid black figure of the Diocesan Visitor.

" It is true then that this Englishman has two hundred wives? " Father Hilario asked.

" If one believed all one heard," answered Don Felipe with a prudent wave of the hand by which he hoped to dismiss the subject, " there would be no end to investigations."

" You have not confirmed the rumour yourself? "

" I cannot afford to be absent from my post so long, Padre. And for what? There is no objection to a serious anthropologist living among the Indians."

" Provided he confines himself to the interests of science," Father Hilario said. " But this Englishman is conducting a mission."

" I do not remember that he had any interest at all in religion."

" It is nine years since you saw him."

Don Felipe looked surprised. Time ran away while one occupied oneself at leisurely government pace. But it was indeed

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all of nine years since Solomon Carver had called on him with—after a full measure of formal courtesies—the bald statement that he intended to go into the forest and study a primitive tribe.

Don Felipe told him that he would not be allowed to do any such thing, that the days were long past when you could paddle up the rivers and establish, if you lived, a mission or a private army or your own little slave state. Peruvian policy was all against irresponsible interference with the Indians.

"Here as elsewhere," Don Felipe had explained to Carver, "he who desires to serve must be appointed to do so."

"I am."

"But by whom?"

"Myself," Carver had said.

Don Felipe pointed out that he had been thinking of some official body like a botanical or geographical society.

"If you mean," replied Carver, "that I must be vouched for by any committee that will take the trouble to print a few letter-heads and obtain some half-witted peer for a patron, then I will see that it is done."

Being a son of parents so poor that his career could only be made in territory where no one else would serve, Don Felipe was bewildered by the arrogance of an ancient university. He perceived, however, that his decayed bungalow, commanding nothing but a landing-stage, a handful of demoralized military, and a collection of thatched roofs hardly distinguishable from the surrounding forest, was being invited into partnership against the whole easily impressionable world.

"It will take me a month," said Solomon Carver.

It took him two.

When the plane from Lima set him down once more on the river, his credentials were in perfect order and described him as an anthropologist.

The Diocesan Visitor, disapprovingly silent while Don Felipe repeated this conversation, replied at once that Carver indeed had influential friends. The suave inquiries of the Church had found out everything about the man. Before the war, a lecturer on anthropology and comparative religion. A serious and too self-sufficient colonel at the end of the war. And then, in his early forties, he had considered it his duty to reject civilization, earnestly proclaiming that there was no other hope for the future of humanity but intensified study of its beginnings. That in itself, Father Hilario insisted, was a doctrine that might lead to all kinds of aberration.

Don Felipe did not agree, but had no wish to argue with Authority. From the government point of view it was far more

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important that he should be able to reply to consuls and relatives that Carver was safe and well, and that no unseemly expedition was required to look for him.

News of the man had filtered down from Indian to Indian, and Indian to trader, and trader to Don Felipe's office. Carver had wandered about among the tribes who understood a little Spanish, learning their languages and how to keep alive. He penetrated farther and farther into the vaporous gorges where the Amazon forests became the Andes, and settled down at last with the dying, melancholy Icuari. Apparently he had found what he wanted, or they had.

His polygamy was a fact. Down the years the number of wives credited to Carver had grown from forty to two hundred. Don Felipe had once or twice considered whether it might not be his business to remonstrate with him; but it was never urgent business. The Icuari were not—by the standards of the Amazon—particularly difficult to reach; they were just of no interest. They had neither mines nor trade nor cultivated clearings nor a navigable river. Water cataracted into their country or shot out of high caves like jets from giant hose-pipes.

"He has gone native," said Don Felipe. "That is regrettable, but of no importance."

Father Hilario stabbed with two restless fingers at the report that lay on the administrator's desk, as if laying anathema upon it. It was the report that had brought him up river. It came from Bolivia; it was detailed and official; and it stated that Carver was not an anthropologist at all but some sort of protestant missionary in disguise.

"And that is of very great importance," he pronounced. "When Anglo-Saxons give themselves to their peculiar religions, they become enraged as mad dogs."

"You have no idea of what it means, Father," Don Felipe protested in a voice of official caution. "Twelve days by launch, eight by canoe, weeks when we shall be wading rather than walking, and without food for the porters."

"When did you last undertake the regulation tour of your district?"

"Bueno! Bueno! But when I am away there is no one to attend to the correspondence."

"Your secretary, perhaps . . ."

Don Felipe made a last, hopeless attempt to avert the inevitable.

"Look, Father—is it likely, this story of wives? Doubtless it arises only from the unfortunate name with which his god-parents presented him. Down here it is hard enough for a man of taste to find one tolerable woman, let alone two hundred."

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The Diocesan Visitor showed the teeth of the Church as well as his own in a formal smile. " But if the doctrines of this man of taste—whatever they may be—were to spread to Christian Indians, you realize that my bishop would be bound to protest to Lima."

Don Felipe surrendered. He gave orders that his camp equipment be packed and that the white-and-gold uniform by which he was accustomed to impress the more accessible native chiefs be left behind. He knew as much about travel in the forest as any trader's headman; that was why he had used all possible tact to avoid it.

The river journey turned out to be more tolerable than he expected. In thirteen days—four by launch and nine by canoe—the party reached the end of the navigable waterways and the last of the Indians who had any regular dealings with the white man. Father Hilario, having got his way, was an excellent companion. He was quick to adjust his approach to any objective. Severity towards officialdom. Considerate and amusing manners in camp.

He also had patience—and that, as soon as they set foot on comparatively dry land, was an indispensable quality. Carver and his Icuari could only be reached by choosing the right valley to follow. The ridges ran more or less parallel to the Cordillera; each was a range of mountains in its own right. Sheer cliff and impassable forest barred all crossing from one valley to the next.

Neither map nor instinct was the least help. A guide who knew the gorges was essential. The first one deliberately wasted time. Don Felipe, who was mild as the Indians themselves, dismissed him with courtesy after four desperate days in the bed of a torrent. The second insisted that they had taken the wrong tributary of the Madre de Dios, and that they must return down-river and try again. Don Felipe stood by his own notes. True, he had compiled them in his flowery patio, but the facts of geography were more easily seen from a basket chair than the bottom of a gorge; he knew that his route was not so mistaken as all that.

The third guide, obtained when food was already beginning to run short, had traded with the Icuari and had no doubt whatever of the path. He insisted that a white man had persuaded the tribe to leave the dripping forest and take to high ground. Their country could be reached in three days' march.

Don Felipe understood that confidence had been established and that this at last was the truth. He decided to send his men downstream to the launch and to food, and to go on alone with Father Hilario.

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" Ask him about the two hundred wives," ordered the Visitor, who did not speak the language of the river sources.

The Indian, not being sure of any numbers over ten, replied to Don Felipe's question, " The cacique has as many as there are stars, and all dressed in white."

Feeling a natural sympathy for anyone who merely desired to be left in peace, Don Felipe was reluctant to stir up trouble before he had to. He translated tactfully, " He says that when we get nearer to the stars, we shall see women dressed in white."

" You see! " exclaimed Father Hilario. " The fellow is teaching some sort of Mohammedan paradise! "

" Very likely."

" And false doctrines travel as far and as fast as the true. This Salomón must leave the country at once."

In the next two days they approached the stars a deal nearer than suited either Don Felipe, who believed in letting a mule do his climbing, or Father Hilario, who usually carried his bishop's authority by canoe. The guide's route, hardly ever perceptible as a path, would have nothing to do with water and rose seven thousand feet to the top of a ridge.

Forty miles to the west, across canyon after canyon unexplorable by anything but vegetation, they could see the mists recoiling from the sheer cliffs and gravelled slopes of the Cordillera Oriental. Don Felipe looked longingly at the edge of the high Peru which was his true homeland. To reach that glimpse of bare skyline would mean, he reckoned, a journey of over six weeks, down the rivers to the frontier of Brazil and Bolivia and then up again.

" And now? " he asked the guide, dreading lest the appalling gorge beneath them should have to be crossed, and the ridge beyond it climbed.

" Not far. We sleep here."

Slow questioning revealed that they were within three hours of the nearest Icuari village; but the guide was unwilling to appear at dusk without warning—though he agreed that the tribe was very peaceful and had no fire-arms, not even the white man. He spoke of them, now that he was on the edge of their country, with almost religious respect.

Don Felipe was surprised at his tone. The Icuari, so far as he knew, were still in a state of transition from food-gathering to agriculture—hardly better, in fact, than a dejected band of apes which had retreated westwards from war and the rivers to die, alone, in the uninhabitable country of the spray.

The two Peruvians and their guide slept in the shelter of an overhanging cliff where camp-fires had been numerous enough

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to burn the moss from the rock. In the morning their path entered a cleared and beaten track. The ridge broadened and then dipped to a saddle.

Looking down on it, they could see huts and cultivated clearings among the trees. A white-robed woman crossed from shadow to shadow.

"It is true!" exclaimed Father Hilario, eager with indignation.

Don Felipe, who had expected nothing more than the hardly visible, timid shelters of savages, was far more impressed by the signs of a purposeful community than by the flicker of white. There was even an alignment of huts; you could almost call it a street. He guardedly expressed his surprise, and was conscious of a humble pleasure that there below them was a situation that could not be bullied into shape by any Diocesan Visitor.

Having no other evidence of his rank and importance, he assumed an official bearing and preceded Father Hilario into the village. There was a reserved welcome. It was clear that the Icuari expected them and had no fear.

The men were the usual bobbed-haired, stocky creatures of the forest, but they carried no arms and their manners were self-assured rather than chattering.

Most of the women were heavy, apathetic, and busy with objectless activities; but among them moved a kind of Wellsian élite, all very young and dressed in sack-like tunics of white cotton, confined at the waist by brilliantly-dyed cords. They looked competent—the last quality one would expect, Father Hilario thought, in idle and corrupted women. Yet there could be no doubt who they were. The devil, too, could sing a psalm when he wished. And why were all the visible children—plenty of them—between the ages of two and four?

Out of the trees, upon the edge of which the children were playing, came a European woman, severely dressed and freshly laundered. She greeted the party in blunt but fairly efficient Spanish, and invited them to accompany her to the upper village.

Invited? It was an order from the matron. Don Felipe explained that he and his companion were by no means the casual and predatory travellers they looked, but the administrator of the district and the representative of the bishop.

"We know that already, Don Felipe," she answered, "and we are all very glad you have come."

"How did you get here, sister?" he asked, knowing that she had never passed through his territory.

"From Bolivia."

"On foot?"

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"On foot. It takes weeks, but it is not really difficult since Señor Carver made the track. A wonderful man! He has worked alone for so long."

"Alone except for you?" Father Hilario asked.

A slight lift of her heavy eyebrows suggested that she did not consider his remark in the best of taste.

"Except for my cousin and myself," she answered. "Naturally there are two of us."

"You are missionaries?"

"No, Father. We only serve."

"But Christians?"

"Of course."

As a priest, Father Hilario knew simplicity when he saw it. As a man of the world, he also recognized its dangers. It was quite possible for this thin, straight woman in, he supposed, her middle forties to belong to some curious sect that practised polygamy. He remembered the strange, selfless aberrations of the Middle Ages, the calm bestialities of the seventeenth century, and the odd privacies of modern prophets. He was careful to phrase his next question so that its meaning was not too definite.

"These women in white—are they the wives?"

"Oh, you have heard of them! How unexpected!" She gave a professional laugh which, in the circumstances, sounded shameless.

"We have heard that Señor Carver has two hundred."

"That would be too many even for him, Father. At the moment he has eighty-nine."

The Diocesan Visitor stared into the tired, greyish face. Her reserved eyes might have belonged to a nun, and he was startled to find that he could not meet them. "Who—who looks after this—er—family?" he asked uneasily.

"My cousin does. I care for the children."

"But is there not a—a chief wife, shall we say?"

"No, Father. We sell them when they are fifteen."

It was incredible. Heaven alone knew what mad heresy was at work among these defenceless Indians! The woman talked as if it were Christian and reasonable to have eighty-nine wives and sell them after . . . after . . . oh, ghastly thought!

Even Don Felipe, though not without a shade of envy, was shocked. He decided to test the matter immediately, and beckoned to a smiling girl whose clumsy Indian figure was all turned to softness by her cotton sack.

"Are you a wife of the white man?" he asked.

"No. I was."

"You have a husband?"

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"I am her husband," said a young man at her side. He leaned upon his digging stick, and regarded both his wife and Don Felipe with proud satisfaction.

"You like her?" inquired the administrator.

"Yes! White man's wives are the best! Many children! White man's wives . . ."

Don Felipe listened gravely to a flow of praise which would have been markedly indelicate in civilized society. The unnecessary details made it quite clear that girls who did not wear the white tunic were still sunk in the old tribal apathy, but that those who did wear it were enchanted by the attentions of husband and children.

He permitted himself to remember that his own private life in his river settlement was extremely unsatisfactory. If only one could get Father Hilario out of the way, a conversation with Don Salomón might be profitable. Yet he felt instinctively that Carver's transactions would be, in some way, far too individual to supply home comforts to lonely and deserving administrators.

"Señor Carver will be glad that you can talk to the Icuari," said the sister.

"You understand the language, too?"

"Naturally. I think Señor Carver would wish you to come with me now," she added.

"Magnificent! What patience! What devotion!" exclaimed Don Felipe to cover his embarrassment.

The track, gravelled like a garden path where the slope was steep and the mud slippery, led them up the other side of the saddle and onto a considerable plateau. Its extent could only be guessed, for the climate was still warm enough and damp enough for the taste of the Icuari and for trees; but here and there the forest had been cut and the bogs primitively drained, leaving glades of desolate beauty.

As they entered the upper settlement, Carver, accompanied by a respectful retinue of men and women and the prancing gaieties of tiny children, came out to meet them. He had aged twenty years in nine, but was still recognizable: still a square, shortish man with a face like a hammered chunk of coarse-grained granite upon which some friend of the sculptor had drawn a burnt-cork moustache.

If he had been attired in a string instead of shirt and trousers, his build, Don Felipe realized, would have been exactly that of the Indians. No doubt the appearance of common humanity had helped his success. He was neither too slim nor too tall to be unfamiliar.

"I must offer you my excuses. This friend"—Carver laid his

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hand on the shoulder of the guide— " should have brought you straight to us instead of coming first to ask for permission. I have never forgotten, Don Felipe, that it was you who allowed me to live here."

An odd reason for gratitude, you would think—to be allowed to die slowly of heat and mildew. But one grew to be content with little. What was Don Felipe himself but an underweight bag of bones and bacteria in a yellow skin?

He responded generously, quite conscious of his Spanish pleasure that there could be courtliness between two men at the world's end, and one of them dressed in rags. " My distinguished friend! How should I not allow it? A man such as you wishing to study our country and its people! And now I have the honour to introduce to you Father Hilario, the representative of the Bishop of the Diocese."

" It is indeed an honour," said Carver, with a scrupulous bow.

" You are not, I believe, of the Church? " Father Hilario asked.

" Father, I fear the differences between one form of Christianity and another are—if I may say so without lack of respect—quite over the head of an anthropologist."

" But what, Don Salomón, do you teach? "

" I came here to learn, not to teach," Carver answered. " But I must admit my hand has been forced. We will speak of it later. You must be very hungry."

Father Hilario was—and the business of satisfying a stomach that had been three-quarters empty for a week enabled him to control his indignation.

Under a leaf shelter Carver and his two guests squatted on stools before pots of food which was dully unpalatable by any civilized standard, but far more nourishing than that of the forest tribes. The plateau grew corn and four different kinds of potato. From the lower slopes the Icuari had bananas and a little coarse rice. Don Salomón apologized for the absence of meat. They killed occasional birds and deer, but it was impossible to keep meat for more than a day or two in their climate. He might, he said, have experimented with cattle if the clearings had not been just within the range of the vampire bat.

" But they do not look like a dying tribe now, would you say? " he asked proudly.

Sister Janet was passing the eating-floor, trying—perhaps for the sake of Father Hilario—to look stern while being pulled apart by four-year-olds. In the middle distance Sheila, surrounded by half a dozen of the white-robed, was superintending a sinister cauldron in which bones were being boiled for the manufacture of soap. The two cousins had a tendency to grow

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black hair—Janet between her eyebrows, Sheila upon her upper lip. Otherwise they had little in common, for Sheila, defying the climate, was bouncing and plump—a fit person, thought Father Hilario, still scandalized in spite of a surfeit of potatoes, to seduce . . . to recruit . . . intolerable!

"How did you obtain these unfortunate Englishwomen, Don Salomón?" he asked.

"I knew them at home—from childhood almost. Trained governesses they were. But nobody wants governesses any more. I wrote to them the very worst. Yes, I write and receive letters sometimes through my agent in Bolivia. But the worse I made it, the more they wished to come. So here they are. Unfortunate? Well, they do not think so, bless them! It compensates for a lot to see a people, naturally good, coming back day by day from death."

"No doubt you have been of much service to these innocents," said Father Hilario. "But I must know what doctrines you teach them."

Carver stared at him. "Doctrines? I don't know. Ask Janet and Sheila! Ardent Anglo-Catholics, they are. Not very different from yourselves, I believe. I will try to make them take a day off if you want to convert them. Takes longer than that, does it? Well, no doubt they will meet you halfway."

The administrator, vaguely perceiving that there was no common ground, returned the conversation to its point of departure. "You said you had brought the Icuari back from death, Don Salomón?"

"Yes. There is no scientific justification. I am probably quite wrong. But the Icuari had been very kind to me. So I fear I forgot all my principles and settled down to raise the birth rate. Fortunately I have a chance to show you how I do it."

He called across the beaten earth of the village to the sister whose plumpness suggested a far too easy conscience, "Is the bride ready, Sheila?"

"Oh yes, Mr. Carver! I think they are all waiting for you. But hospitality comes first, doesn't it?" she added brightly.

Before Father Hilario could protest against the promised spectacle, Carver had risen and carried his two guests along with him.

He stumped through the huts like a solid captain proud of his quarter-deck, and entered a crowd of the Icuari which parted to let him through. The casual, contented movement was far more impressive than respect.

Under a shelter of boughs were standing a girl in a white tunic, a young pot-bellied savage with an immense navel and a wide

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grin, and what presumably were their families. Four old men squatted in a corner, wise, naked, and unconcerned. They were the colour of rotten pineapples and had something of the same smell.

"Would you care to do a professional job on these two children, Padre?" Carver invited.

The Diocesan Visitor did not reply. His set face was sufficient answer.

"Very well then, I shall carry on as usual. I assure you that you have no reason to object if Janet and Sheila do not. They have approved my translation of the marriage service into Icuari."

"Then you do teach—all three of you!"

"I know. I should not do it. But it was unavoidable. Let me give you an example. The Icuari believe that maternal uncles become armadillos after death. That is of great interest. But once I had noted every aspect of any value to anthropology, I found the belief as inconvenient as they did. Defunct maternal uncles are a social nuisance. So I just outlined as much Christianity as a child of five could be expected to assimilate."

"A child of five," exclaimed Father Hilario, "is not too young to be corrupted."

"Really, Father, you are most narrow-minded. We cannot possibly do better until you send us a missionary. Now, we are going to approve the price of the bride first."

Don Felipe swallowed a last mouthful, and stuffed half a potato into his pocket. His power over both contestants was in theory absolute—though in practice limited by a sincere desire to avoid trouble either with the Icuari or the Church—but he was aware that during the collision of such characters a civil servant would be wise to confine himself to his daily bread.

It was safe and proper, however, to put on the paternal face which he used for official occasions. Judicially and with his fingertips together, he heard the bridegroom declare that six poles of seasoned wood, sheltered from rain and free of white ant, were offered for the bride. Carver turned to the four old men. "Am I to accept the six poles?"

They made a solemn pretence of consulting one another, but it was plain to Don Felipe that the committee's decision had been reached, much as elsewhere, before the formal meeting.

"It is too cheap. He must add a roof beam."

"You hear?"

"I will add a roof beam."

The bride's expression turned from slight anxiety to pride. She had cost her husband—considering his tools—months of patience and hard work.

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During the ceremony Father Hilario kept silence, for it was simple and reverent. There could be no doubt that this heretic and his two women, however abominable their doctrine, had accustomed the Icuari to Christian ritual.

It was not until dancing and drinking began, and the laity—if one could think of them as laity—had reverted to their primeval paganism that he demanded, "Was that woman your wife, or was she not?"

"By tribal law she was," Carver replied.

"And how long has she been so?"

"Sheila, how long was she my wife?"

"You bought her from her uncle when she was eight. Number 47 on the card index. A very obstinate case of worms. You ought to remember, Mr. Carver," said Sheila sternly. "I do not know how you got on at all before Janet and I came."

Don Salomón for the first time looked slightly embarrassed. "It's the bad habit of trusting to your cards," he said. "Of course! Comes back to me now. Pretty little thing she was. She came in on that bad lot of skins. They rotted in six months. Shocking! I had to pay for her all over again."

"With what kind of skins?" asked Don Felipe politely.

"Otter. The price of a wife is nine skins. Quite understandable. A mink coat, as it were. A very sound medium of exchange originally."

"Sound, in heaven's name!" Father Hilario exclaimed.

"Originally, I said. When the Icuari were a river people it was a practical form of dowry. It proved that the bridegroom had enterprise and could handle a canoe. But after they migrated to these valleys they found few otters, and soon wiped those out. To get nine otter skins took years of hunting. And by the time the last was collected, ants or mildew had usually destroyed the first. A man like that"—he pointed to the aggressively dancing bridegroom—"had no hope of a wife till he was so old that he would care for nothing but sitting round a fire.

"That was the position when they received me as their guest. Too little money chasing too many goods. Result—no children. We are all conservative in these matters. The Icuari would not change from otter skins any more than we will change from gold."

"And so you took advantage of that?" asked Don Felipe with an entirely neutral courtesy.

"Yes. There was nothing else for it. I gave a standing order for otter skins in Bolivia. No one else wants them. My agent thinks I am mad. But he collects them for me, and I go and fetch them twice a year."

"But then you do not leave any wives for anyone else!"

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" Oh, that's an exaggeration! But whenever I find a promising child with no hope of a husband, I marry her myself and sell her when she is fit to be sold."

Don Felipe was ashamed of his past inactivity. What an exposure of his liberal administration! And under the horrified eyes of the Church!

" This passing through your hands enhances their value? " he asked.

" No! No! No! " answered Carver with forced academic patience. " It reduces their value. That's the whole point. As a man of the world, you should understand it at once."

The Anglo-Saxon shamelessness of the man was distasteful to Don Felipe. Any truly Christian gentleman would have clothed such a remark in more decent ambiguity.

" And how did you—to use a frank expression—get away with it? "

" Simple, once I had their confidence! Night after night with the old men. There they are! Just like politicians anywhere else—walking memories, but no constructive thought for the future. Chatter, chatter. I took it all down. Rivers flowing and maternal uncles, and quiet acceptance that the tribe must die. And then they came out with the tale of a custom permitting a husband to sell his wife for anything he liked to take. Quite legal, but half forgotten. Naturally! Who would want to sell a wife when it was practically impossible to buy one?

" Well, I saw my way at once. I could buy them young for otter skins and sell them for something sensible when they were fifteen. That is what you have just seen me do—sell a wife for the makings of a sound hut. I shall put the married couple in it, of course."

" I have a liberal education," exclaimed Don Felipe. " No one can say I do not sympathize with temptation. But eighty-nine! "

" Yes, it's astonishing how my little family grew. I taught them a bit of sensible religion and tried to give them self-respect. Any man can handle a girl up to the age of eleven or so. But time passes. When my first batch of wives were close on twelve, I had to send for Janet and Sheila."

" It is beyond belief! " Don Felipe cried, all the more angry because he was aware of a most improper jealousy. " And then to introduce two crazed women to assist you! "

Carver stood up and, instantly, the old men with him.

" What the devil do you mean, man? Crazed women—those two angels? Come out of here immediately! "

The Icuari had perceived his anger. Don Felipe realized that they would strike out like frightened children if Carver made the

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least gesture of violence, but had a human faith that Carver would not. After all, he himself had sometimes been in a position to raise a finger. He scurried through, a little ahead of his host, endeavouring to preserve an expression of the utmost geniality.

The Diocesan Visitor followed more slowly, smiling with inexplicable tenderness. He even blessed the bride as he passed her. It was extremely unfair, Don Felipe thought, that Father Hilario should leave the secular authority to interrogate this disgraceful debauchee and then shy away from the results. Typical of those black crows, it was! The Church, to start with, had been altogether too ready to bring in its thunders and, having made all the trouble, was now being exquisitely courteous.

"Don Salomón," Father Hilario was saying, "you have been in the forest how long?"

"Let me see now! Crazed women indeed! A year before I found the Icuari. And six—no, no, over eight years since."

"Verily what devotion! No wonder it was difficult at first for us to understand each other."

"I cannót see why. Souls for God you want, don't you? Well—if I may use your terminology—when I began to love this people, so did I. Increase and multiply, that is what I am trying to make them do. Clear, I hope? Many thanks! No reason for a government officer to think we are all mad, is there? Look!"

Sister Janet, attended by two nursery maids in the white tunic of Carver's wives, was telling a story to a dozen or so fascinated infants. "*Suffer little children to come unto Me*," Carver explained. "It is gross interference with their folk-lore. But the fact is, Padre, I have found in practice that if you want to raise a whole community from the dead there is nothing like elementary Christianity to do it."

"That has been our experience too," said Father Hilario gravely. "I am very glad to hear it confirmed from such an—unexpected quarter. May I inspect the children, sister?"

"Of course, Reverend Father," Janet replied proudly. "Their heads are beautifully clean now."

Don Felipe, left out of the conversation in disgrace, also looked closely at the Icuari nursery class. He knew what Father Hilario was up to. Either of them, from long experience, could distinguish as little as one-eighth of white blood. There was none.

He ventured to reassert himself with a delicate question, "Sister Janet, the bride whom we have just seen married—would you describe her as—well—inexperienced?"

"Certainly not, Don Felipe. She was one of my best pupils."

The administrator blinked his fever-yellowed eyes under the impact of such innocence, but tried again.

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" And you see nothing questionable in this second marriage? "

" No, Don Felipe. After all, they are quite normal girls. They would be very disappointed if they had to belong to Mr. Carver's family for ever, wouldn't they? "

Father Hilario opened his arms in a jovial gesture which included the desolate, rain-sodden hill-top and all the children, old and young, upon it. His bark of laughter sounded through Icuari mists the sunlit trumpets of Europe.

" What's up? What's amusing you? " asked Carver.

" My dear, noble friend! Ah, but you must see the jest of it! The inquisitor descending upon Bluebeard! "

" I still do not understand," Don Salomón insisted formally. " You must forgive me. The Icuari laugh seldom. One loses the habit."

Don Felipe silently agreed. It was appallingly true—poor devils that they were, out here in the uninhabitable. He himself, before this journey with Father Hilario, had for years seen no reason for any more than a melancholy smile.

" You have never any thought of the world outside—you and your two angels? "

" Yes, yes, Padre. Oh yes, I must admit there are times when we think of home. But what with keeping each other alive and speaking the language to each other, we do tend to become single-minded—indeed, apart from our purpose, to have few thoughts the Icuari cannot share."

" But they would not mind, I suppose," said Father Hilario, " if the girls you buy were your wives in fact as well as name."

" What ever are you suggesting? " exclaimed Don Salomón, much embarrassed. " I assure you, Padre, that—like yourself no doubt—I have learnt . . . I have been able . . . due to a celibate academic background . . . apart from some innocent play with the opposite sex in early youth . . . in fact," he added stoutly, " I have very little use for that sort of thing."

The administrator gasped at so uncompromising a rejection of opportunity. " But if you had any faith, Don Salomón, you would be a saint! " he protested.

" Don Felipe," said Father Hilario, " when God has produced the miracle before the faith, we should not, I think, be too ready to advise Him from our own experience in mere trifles of administration which should come first and which second."

★ ★ ★

SEE YOU LATER, ALLIGATOR

An appeaser is one who feeds a crocodile hoping it will eat him last.

SIR WINSTON CHURCHILL

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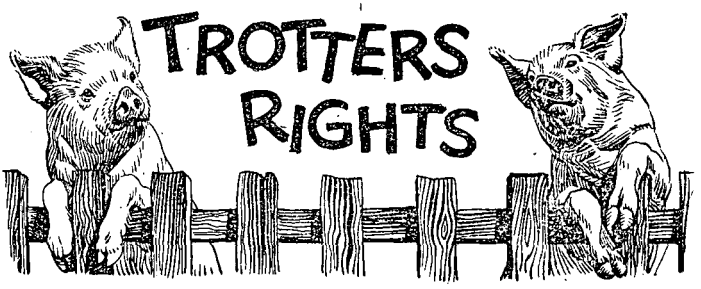

The Pig is the most important single factor in determining the degree of success or failure attained in pig-keeping.

V. C. FISHWICK, *Pigs*

Merciful powers, will ye look at this villain,
The worst that the divil has ever employed.
Never his like for devourin' and killin';
Night, noon and morning he has me destroyed.
Six of me chickens he's eaten, the brute,
And chawed up the breeches of Peter's new suit;
Desperate animal, murdering cannibal,
Where is the happiness I once enjoyed?

L. A. G. STRONG, *The Wicked Pig*

Pigs in Clover

Gilbert Harding came down that week-end. He arrived in an aggrieved frame of mind on account of the antics of a mother and baby on the train . . . But next morning he went down with the others to feed the pigs and after that he hardly set foot indoors again until Monday morning. He simply could not bear to watch them snuffling around the trough, hoping to find a forgotten crumb after their meal. He found some bricks at the bottom of the garden and built an outdoor stove and gathered wood and lit a fire in it, and got an old bucket and boiled potatoes in it all week-end and gave them to the pigs. Sunday afternoon was bleak and grey and I went down to the stableyard to suggest he came indoors and had tea. He was sitting watching the bucket boil with a far-away expression like a holy man sitting on top of a pillar in the desert. He said gently that he hoped no one would

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feel wounded if he didn't join the party but he was just discovering what contentment lay in supplying food to simple, grateful creatures. He was so benign that he occasionally tossed a potato over the wires to the hens, though he was not fond of them. This was the happiest week-end of the pigs' lives.

RUTH ADAM, *A House in the Country*

Long Pig

He had followed the pig through a tall hedge of tangles
On to a lane leading from Wootton Rivers,
From which it had apparently strayed, as pigs do,
And he had been into the field to drive it back.

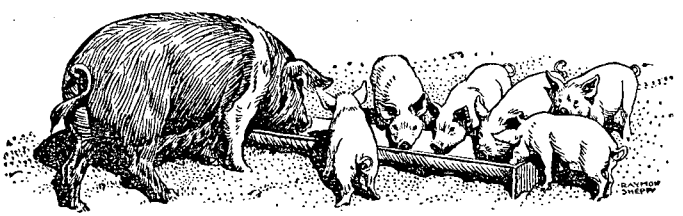
He was working for the brothers, he said, at Easton Royal
Where, as I probably knew, there was a friary
Whence he had been despatched, it seemed, by the head brother
To Wootton Rivers to fetch the pig.

And seeing what he had come through, I couldn't help thinking
He ought to have been all tousled and torn and briary.
But he wasn't. And indeed, at the most,
Only his thick hair was a little untidy.

And he grinned and rubbed it and said that he reckoned
It might a' bin' a inch or two shorter.
But none o' they branches, he said, can't stick it now
Because properly speakin' I be a ghost.

Then this pig, I said, as it came to be tickled,
Must have been four or five centuries on the way.
Well, what of it, he said, where's the 'urry?
Pig'll get there some day.

H. H. BASHFORD, *The Ghost*



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Petrified Pig

" Sir Mulberry got this litter of pigs a good time back, and one of the pigs was a male pig—"

" Man means a boar," said Colonel Pike.

" Thank you sir; that would be the technical word, no doubt . . . For this particular boar, you see, he thought a world of—and if you're to believe his men about the place he'd be across and visit it most every morning. Then one day when the brute was full grown and Sir Mulberry had gone over as usual to have a word with it he found that it had been spirited away in the night. Only something else had been left in its place: a great boar in marble or some such stuff that must have weighed pretty well a ton . . . And soon the story was going round among the servants that it was the hand of God laid heavy on Sir Mulberry for his wicked pride in his pig. There had been a judgment in the night and the brute had been ossified."

Colonel Pike pushed two empty port glasses into the rear file and brought forward a full one. " Means petrified," he said.

MICHAEL INNES, *Appleby's End*

Truffle-Hunt

The old Pig said to the little pigs,
" In the forest is truffles and mast,
Follow me then, all ye little pigs,
Follow me fast! "

The Charcoal-Burner sat in the shade
With his chin on his thumb,
And saw the big Pig and the little pigs,
Chuffling come.

He watched 'neath a green and giant bough,
And the pigs in the ground
Made a wonderful grisling and gruzzling
And greedy sound.

And when, full-fed, they were gone, and Night
Walked her starry ways,
He stared with his cheeks in his hands
At his sullen blaze.

WALTER DE LA MARE, *The Pigs and the Charcoal-Burner*

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LAST SNOWFALL

This was not the way he had planned it

BY OWEN CAMERON

THE highway climbed out of the valley towards the distant peaks, a wide, safe strip of civilization laid through the untamed mountains. A light rain was falling, and the forecast was for a week-long storm.

The weather was important to Morgan. He was pleased when, at a height of about four thousand feet, the rain became snow, soft and wet at first, but soon lying white on ground and trees. By morning there would be a foot or more of snow, snow that would stay until spring, added to by every storm, covering everything. Covering him.

At midday he reached Duncan's. It was an all-year resort, but the summer trade was over, the winter sports not yet begun, and he had the dining-room to himself. He had counted on that, too. He had a couple of drinks and ate enough to make his appetite appear normal, but seemed in no hurry to go on. He talked to the pretty waitress; she listened, bored, but she would remember him, remember that he had been in good spirits, full of enthusiasm for the big buck he expected to bring back. He found an excuse for telling her that his name was Harry Morgan, and that he lived in the city. He talked of his happy, prosperous life there. Oh, she would remember him, all right, and recall that he had been cheerful as a cricket, and had planned to come back in two days.

Morgan's private road left the highway two miles farther up. The waitress glanced out at the falling snow, an inch or two on the ground now, and said he might have trouble getting out.

Morgan said, carelessly, that he had chains, and she looked out of the window again at his car, and said that might not be enough in the mountains. Morgan asked if she knew Ed Hollingsworth, and she did, and he told her that he could always walk out to Hollingsworth's and get him to clear the road with his tractor.

Morgan left her a large tip. She would remember him, when the time came. Outside, he bought petrol, had his chains put

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on, chatted some more, and went on, knowing that the attendant, like everyone he had spoken to for weeks, would recall that he had been cheerful—not in the least depressed. There should be no more than a perfunctory investigation, a verdict of death by misadventure, but insurance investigators were suspicious people.

The private road was barred by a gate and a warning sign. Morgan unlocked the gate, drove through, and at once was in the primitive forest. The road was metalled but narrow, the new-fallen snow unmarked except by tracks of deer. He drove slowly, taking thirty minutes to reach the lake.

It was a lovely spot; he would miss it as much as anything on this earth. Pines ringed the small lake, and mountains reared high above it. No smoke rose from the caretaker's hut, but Morgan walked round the lake, rapped on the door, then looked in. Tazewell was not there. Morgan guessed the old man was out tracking a buck. At seventy, Tazewell still retained his enthusiasm for hunting, his love of the mountain solitude. At times, Morgan, who was too busy to spend more than a few days here each year, envied the old man.

Morgan walked back to his car and carried his suitcase into the lodge. It was four o'clock now, already dusk. He lit an oil lamp, stoked the stove and the fire, and started a letter to his sister, saying he expected to see her early in January. They would find the unfinished letter on the table—one more bit of evidence that he had planned to live, not die.

The snow, which was falling steadily, was already four inches deep on the ground. No light came on in Tazewell's hut. He told himself the old man must have gone to town, walking as far as the main road and getting a lift in with Hollingsworth or one of the other locals.

After a supper of tinned stuff, he drank a hot rum and went to bed. All day his mind had been on what he was doing, not what he was going to do. But now, sleepless in the dark room this last night of his life, he went over it again, not to find another way out—there was none—but to be sure.

As one of a miner's six children, Morgan had known grinding poverty, but by brains and hard work he had made himself a rich man before he was thirty. He had never stopped climbing; but now the ladder had been kicked from under him, and he was falling. It was partly his fault for trusting a crooked partner too much, but there wasn't a damned thing he could do about it. They could take everything—house, business, the investments that were to have taken care of his family. He'd have to fight to stay out of gaol.

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He was no longer young, but that wouldn't have stopped him from starting navvying again if he had to. He could still handle pick and shovel, he had a big, tough body, and he was a fighter. But Jo, sweet and gentle Jo, had never known the harshness of poverty, and never would, even if it meant he was not to see her again.

The thought drove him out of bed back into the living-room for another drink. Over the fireplace was a framed picture of Jo and the three children, and if he had needed anything to convince him he was doing the right thing, there it was. He lifted his glass to the picture, saying gravely, " My darling . . . look after yourself."

His wife was still young, eleven years younger than he was. She would miss him, she would grieve, but time healed such wounds. Better that than poverty, the wrecking of her gracious way of life. Jo was too sweet, too gentle for bitter fighting. He had always looked after her and still would.

She had been nineteen when they met, the daughter of a professor of philosophy. Pouring himself another drink, Morgan smiled, remembering that first meeting, like something out of a film—the big, old house in Georgia, her absent-minded father, the ancient servant and his wife. And Jo, in a white dress, looking such an aristocrat, but inwardly so shy and gentle.

He had always provided for her well. How could he ask her now to move into a dingy flat, while he started the hard climb again—with no guarantee that he'd get there a second time? No, this was the best, the only way. He could do nothing else for her.

Tomorrow he would go hunting in the snow. At first he had considered a shooting accident, a bullet in his chest, but the insurance people might argue about that.

A better way was to swallow enough pills to put him under, then when they found him in the spring it would be assumed that he had lost his way and died of exposure. Jo and the children would have the trust-fund and life insurance. There was no other way to protect them, and he felt no reluctance.

Two drinks later, at midnight, he went to bed and slept soundly. In the morning, his last morning, he awoke feeling cheerful, pleased that the snow was still falling as forecast. He would go for a hunt, come back, and talk hunting with old Tazewell, go out again this afternoon, and not return. The old man could not look for him until next day, and by then he would be hidden by the fine, lovely snow. Some time tomorrow, Tazewell would go out to the main road for help, and Hollingsworth would come up with his tractor, but another night would pass before any thorough search could be organized. He would sleep undiscovered until the snow thawed in late spring.

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He dressed warmly, took the rifle, and walked to Tazewell's cabin, irritated to find it empty. He needed Tazewell for his plan, and looked about the cabin for evidence that the old man had gone to town and was waiting out the storm. There was nothing, and it was unlike Tazewell to let a snowfall stop him.

"His dog is gone, too," Morgan said aloud. If Tazewell had gone to town, the dog would have been at the cabin.

Worried now, Morgan stepped outside. The falling snow made a curtain, cutting visibility to a hundred yards or so. Tazewell must be out there, but in what direction, and what had happened to him? An old man's bones were brittle, an old man's heart not strong.

Morgan headed straight away from the lake into the forest. At once he was in a white space without landmarks, the lake and its buildings gone, but he had no fear of getting lost. Away from the lake was always uphill: downhill would bring him back. Now and then he stopped, firing the rifle and straining in the silence to hear an answer. When he judged he was half a mile from the lake he turned left, to make a wide circle. The fifth time he fired he heard a faint answering crack.

Even so, it took him twenty minutes to find Tazewell—rather, to be found by the dog, which ran barking out of the whiteness, then led him to where the old man sat in the snow, blue with cold, too exhausted even to feel hope.

"Broke my leg," he mumbled. "Made a splint and crutches, but began to think—never make it."

Morgan was not sure he would make it. Tazewell's look of lean toughness was gone; the life in him flickered feebly, like a candle in an empty house.

"When did it happen, Taze?"

"Yesterday. I've come quite a way, since. It was awful tough going."

Tazewell closed his eyes, putting himself in Morgan's hands.

Thinking of the old man's dreadful ordeal, Morgan told himself that he could not lose now, after winning through as far as this. He knelt in the snow to examine the old man's leg, splinted with torn shirt and pine boughs, and tried to decide what was to be done. Back at the hut there were skis and sleds, but could the old man survive even a few extra minutes out here? Already he was on the edge, slipping towards the point of no return. Morgan made up his mind, and shook Tazewell's shoulder.

"I'm going to carry you in. It'll hurt the leg, but it's quickest."

Tazewell nodded and Morgan lifted him up, helping him to balance on his good leg. Morgan crouched in the snow, taking the weight, straightening and lifting as carefully as he could.

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"All right?" he asked, twisting to look at Tazewell. There was no answer—the old man had fainted.

The trip was a nightmare. The snow made his footing uncertain, he staggered and several times almost fell. Tazewell began to mutter deliriously. Once he called the dog, sharply, and the dog, sensing that something was wrong, cringed unhappily.

Once the old man said in a normal tone, "Put me down, Morgan. You won't make it."

"Not—licked yet," Morgan grunted. He stumbled, and heard Tazewell grind his teeth in pain.

A moment later, the old man said clearly, "Afford it or not, Ida, I'm getting the doctor."

Morgan remembered that Tazewell's wife had been named Ida. She had been dead twenty years.

Endless white, always white, infinity was white. Morgan was beaten, but a man can always take one more step, strike one more blow, and it came down to that now: one step, another step, one step more, one more.

He staggered along with his head down, the old man on his back mumbling feverishly, and then the lake was at his feet, black against the snow, and he turned right, towards the hut, kicked open the door, and gently lowered Tazewell to the bed. He felt suddenly weightless; he seemed to float out to the kitchen, where he made a hot drink for Tazewell and fed the dog.

Tazewell obediently drank and swallowed a codeine tablet. But his face was flushed now, and he asked, "Is she going to be all right, Doc?"

Morgan abruptly realized that the problem was not solved. Something more than a broken leg was wrong with Tazewell—pneumonia, perhaps. That meant a doctor, perhaps an oxygen tent, and that meant getting Tazewell out to the main road. If he went out alone, he'd have to locate Hollingsworth, who might or might not be at home, and it would be hours before the man could bring up his tractor and clear the way for a car. Again, the hard way was the only way.

Knowing it was futile, he started the car. In ten minutes he did ten yards, and he gave that up and unlocked the store-room. There were sleds, too small for any use, and several pairs of skis. In a matter of minutes, he nailed four together, parallel, and had a seven-foot sled. A cleat held the tow-rope and when the blanket-wrapped Tazewell—eyes closed now, his breathing laboured and rasping—was tied in place, the sled went forward smoothly.

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But on the road, which rose steeply away from the lake, the sled dragged, and the soft, fine snow spilt onto it, increasing its weight. Now and then Morgan stopped to clear it away and have a look at Tazewell, but that was the only rest he permitted himself. He was panting and drenched with sweat when they reached the top of the first rise. Then it was downhill, the sled glided smoothly, and Morgan went at a shuffling trot.

There was a narrow stretch of level ground and then a longer, steeper slope. Progress slowed to a crawl, and halfway up the hill he slipped and fell to his knees, the breath tearing at his lungs. He was not sure he could get up again, not even sure it was worth trying.

He got up. Turning to look at Tazewell, he saw that the old man's eyes were open, sane, and his feeble whisper was rational.

"Couldn't make out where I was, for a minute. Never give up, do you?"

"Not yet," Morgan said hoarsely.

"Wondered about you," the old man said dreamily. "Wife's like my Ida . . . never crack. Thought you had a soft spot, maybe. Win or lose . . . satisfaction . . . know you won't lay down, ain't it?" He closed his eyes again.

"We'll win," Morgan told him.

Ten minutes later, he knew they had lost. The sled broke apart, first one nail, then another, and lay in two sections. Morgan looked down at it despairingly, and around at the white, empty world. He remembered the struggle it had been to reach the hut with Tazewell on his back, when he had been fresh and strong. That half-mile had been almost too much for him; and how far was it to the road from here—five miles, six?

This time Tazewell did not faint when Morgan lifted him, but moaned and gritted his teeth. Morgan moved ahead, knowing in his heart that it was no good. His muscles were watery, his heart thumped unevenly, and it was only a matter of time before he went down and stayed down.

This was not the way he had planned it, he thought with weary amusement, but it would come to the same thing. Only, they would find him and Tazewell easily, on the road. It was better this way. But suddenly, he did not want it. Tazewell made the difference, he told himself, but it was Jo he thought about, stumbling forward with his head down . . .

He almost walked into the jeep. He had not heard it, had not seen it, and still did not believe it was there, even when Hollingsworth climbed out, shouting at them. "What happened? Taze hurt? Girl at Duncan's said you were up—thought you might need the road ploughed out, and—here, I've got him."

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Morgan sat down in the snow. As gently as a woman, Hollingsworth helped Tazewell into the open back of the jeep, and returned to bend over Morgan and pull him to his feet.

Hollingsworth drove straight to town, the four chain-wrapped wheels grinding on the metalled road. Tazewell was delirious again, but the young doctor who supervised his removal to a stretcher said confidently, "We'll pull him round." He looked at Morgan. "We'd better find a bed for you, too, I think."

"Something to do, first," Morgan said. "Have to make a telephone call."

There was a telephone box in the hospital corridor, and the girl at the desk put through the long-distance call for him. When he heard Jo's voice, his hand shook, and it was hard to find words for what he wanted to say.

"Hullo, my darling. How are you?"

"Oh, fine. And you?" She had not expected the call, and her tone was worried. "Nothing's wrong, is it?"

"No. I just love you." Again he heard Tazewell murmur, *Your wife's like my Ida*, and he wanted to ask her, without telling her the facts, what she really wanted, struggle or security? Because she should have the right to choose, he thought incoherently; everyone has the right to choose to fight or to surrender.

"Harry? Are you sure you're all right? Has something happened?"

"We're broke," he said bluntly. "I don't know—look, you can go back to the Georgia house for a time and I'll fight to save what I can. Maybe—probably there won't be anything. I had another idea, and I still could—I mean later I might, if . . ."

He stammered into silence, and Jo asked in a quiet voice, "How broke? The house?"

"Gone. Business gone. It's all gone."

"But not the Georgia property?"

"That's in your name."

"Then we're not broke," she said. "And there's my new car, and the children's government savings bonds, and have you any idea how much jewellery you've given me?"

"No. I won't—"

"You will! Georgia! One room, no room at all is better, as long as we're together. And we can borrow on your insurance, and—oh!" He heard her quick intake of breath, two hundred miles away, and then she asked urgently, "Harry? Why did you wait, why did you tell me like this?"

He could not think of an answer to that quickly enough, and her voice was loud, frantic. "Harry! Come home, come now!"

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He said unsteadily, " I'm on my way. Don't worry, d'you hear? I'll be there in five hours—four. Only—there'll be some hard times, doing without things . . ."

" There's only one thing I can't do without," she said. " The two of us . . . After all these years, don't you *know* ? "

" I know. Now I know."

He hung up, his mind already busy with the coming fight. No point in trying to prop up what was bound to fall anyhow. Let it crash, save what could be saved from the wreckage, start building again. He could let the lake as a summer camp; Tazewell could stay on as caretaker. He did not doubt that Tazewell would pull through, nor did the doctor, nor did Tazewell himself.

The old man even managed a faint smile, and whispered, " Owe you something."

Morgan answered, " I owe *you* something—we're even."

He turned to the young doctor.

" I'll be all right," he said, " Hollingsworth is waiting to drive me home."

★ ★ ★

PRESENT LAUGHTER

When the wallet's empty but the stockings are full, take off the white whiskers and put on your thinking-cap to answer these teasers. We aren't giving anything away, but the answers are on page 82.

1. *Who was the original Santa Claus and what is his connection with pawnbrokers?*

2. *Everyone knows the gifts the Magi brought, but can you remember their names?*

3. *What nation is to be feared when they come bringing gifts? And what poet said so?*

4. *Fill in the blanks:*
   a. give a dog a — —
   b. no gift is more precious than — —
   c. give the devil his —

5. *Talking of the devil, what was it he gave with his daughter in marriage?*

6. *What does it mean to give:*
   i. what Paddy gave the drum
   ii. a sleigh ride
   iii. a Chinaman a music lesson
   iv. 'em thisa and thata

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KEDGEREE

" Blimey," said someone.
" It's Moby Dick ! "

BY PATRICK RYAN

I SUPPOSE the unloveliest moment of my life was when my father hit me with a haddock.

I was eleven years old at the time and my mother had been dead for six years. My father and I lived together in two upstairs rooms of a terrace house near the Old Kent Road. He was out at work most of the time and I kept house. I did most of the cooking and we lived handsomely on porridge, stew, shop cake, and things that you could boil or fry. I wasn't a good cook then but I was adventurous and I was learning fast.

One Friday he wanted a haddock for his supper. He had little change and he gave me half a crown to get it with. In those days money was money and you could buy a sizeable haddock for fourpence. It was after six o'clock when I went out and I decided to go down to the stall-market. I was a pretty keen shopper and up to most of the tricks. The housewives held that you got the cheapest fish at the stall-market on a Friday evening. The stall-holders had no refrigerators, and cut prices in order to sell out before the weekend.

I was a bit late, however, and everybody was packing up when I got there. Only one stall was still open where a ginger-haired man was busy stacking up his barrow. " Hullo, todger," he said. " What d'you want? "

" A haddock, please."

" How much? "

A sneeze burst upon me and I dropped the half-crown.

" Half a crown? " he said. " I can give you a beauty for half a crown."

" No," I said. " I only want a sixpenny one."

He looked at the coin in his hand. A red weasel, he was. " A sixpenny one? Not if you're as smart as you look, todger. You ever thought about the economics of buying haddocks? "

" No," I said.

" Well, then, look at it this way. For sixpence you get a little one about so big and it's gone in a couple of mouthfuls. Lucky

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if you feed one human being properly off it. You don't get value for money like that. You got to buy big to get value. That's what all the smart boys do—buy big. Like this . . ."

He pulled down a rod from the roof of the stall. Impaled on it was the biggest smoked haddock I ever saw. It was one of those monster fish they keep for show and never seem to sell. It must have been a good two feet across the chest and about the same in length. Spread-eagled, it was like a pale young doormat.

"There you are. That's the way to buy haddock. Seven and six, that would have cost you two hours ago. But you're a smart one, you are. You wait till I got to sell out and you get it for half a crown. A smart one, you are, and no mistake."

Flattery still goes down me like syrup. He handed me the behemoth wrapped in newspaper and I walked proudly home with it tucked under my arm. The great tail stuck out as if there was a seal inside.

I unrolled my parcel on the table.

"Saints preserve us!" said my father. "What is it?"

"It's a haddock," I said. "A big haddock."

"You speak no lie, boy. It's big all right." He prodded it. "Is it real or artificial?"

"Real."

He lifted it and looked underneath.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

"Jonah," he said. "You're not expecting me to eat all this, are you?"

"Not all at once. It'll last us for about six meals."

He looked frightened. "Six meals? All haddock?"

"Not one after another," I said. "We can spread them over the next fortnight. That's economics, Dad. You see, you buy big to get value—it's cheaper that way."

He sniffed at the fish. "Look professor," he said. "I'm only an ignorant working man and I don't want to come between you and your economics, but that haddock'll be bad by this time tomorrow night. So, in your theory, we've got to eat six meals of haddock in the next twenty-four hours. We'd have to sit up all night eating haddock to do it."

The pride went out of me. There was the flaw, there went the smart boy.

My father picked up the fish by the tail and swung it gently to and fro. "Holy Mother!" he chuckled. "Monstro himself. The Twelve Apostles could feed off him. And come again . . ."

Then a sudden thought struck him and his humour fled away. "Where's the change from my half-crown? I told you to get a sixpenny one."

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" Well," I said, " you couldn't expect to get that much haddock for sixpence—"

" *How much was it? Where's the change?* "

I backed away. He was boiling up and he needed room.

" Well," I said, " the man said it was worth seven and six. So there couldn't be much change, could there? "

" Never mind what the man said. How much was it? "

" Half a crown." Further delay, I judged, would only worsen the eventual explosion.

" Half a crown! You spent half a crown on this mouldering monster? Take it back! Take it back and get me my half-crown! "

I never take things back to shops. It is the only principle I have in life. " No," I said. " I'll save up and pay for it, but I won't take it back."

" Take it back, boy! " he yelled. " Do as I tell you."

" Now, look at it this way—" I started.

" And you look at it this way," he countered and swung the haddock round-arm at the side of my head. It took me on the left temple and curled like the hand of Neptune across my face. Fish-blind, I stumbled to the door.

" All right," I said, grabbing the haddock. " I'll get your half-crown for you. Then you'll be sorry."

I ran down the stairs and into the street. He was working nights and I stayed out till after he'd gone.

It was Saturday next day and I wrapped up the fish and went out before my father got back from work. I put it in brown paper because the smell was getting feverish. I had decided to take it to the main fish market at Billingsgate, calculating that it was no good to the domestic consumer.

It was a long walk and it was about ten o'clock when I crossed the bridge over the last of the canals on the way. There was a crowd gathered at one side and I stopped to join it.

Just beside the bridge there was a derelict wharf. An ancient jetty ran out into the canal; for the first few feet it was covered by rotting boards, then its position was marked only by bare rusty piers sticking up out of the water. On one of these piers a cat was sitting.

There was just room for it, no more, and I couldn't make out how it had got there. Perhaps the boards had fallen away behind it. Anyway, with over six feet of clear water between it and the last of the jetty, and no room to gather itself, it clearly couldn't get back. It sat erect like a stylite and mewed plaintively for help.

There was a policeman in the crowd and a thin old lady in a

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black coat and a feathered hat was talking to him. "Please get him back, officer. I assure you he's a most rare and valuable cat. I'm sure he's an Abyssinian."

It looked like any tabby to me, but who was I to say?

"All right, madam," said the policeman. "We'll see what we can do. But all we can do from up here is to block the pavement."

We all followed him down the steps to the towpath and gathered at the end of the jetty. He stepped onto the first of the boards. It sagged and creaked ominously. He stepped back onto the path.

"That won't hold much weight. Not mine anyway."

The old lady hopped like a sparrow in agitation and her eyes were full and unhappy.

"Oh, please, *please*, officer. Get him back somehow. He's so frightened out there." She waved her handbag excitedly. "I'll pay a reward—a reward if you can save him."

A reward. Money. Half a crown. Or more . . . The price of the haddock, my honour redeemed, economics vindicated and, maybe, a profit. My luck was turning.

I wriggled through the crowd to the head of the jetty. The cat turned towards me, mewing loudly, wriggling precariously. "I'll get him," I said. "It'll hold my weight."

I stepped onto the first boards. I was only five and a half stone and they made no complaint.

"Now you come right back!" cried the policeman. "It's not safe out there." I moved a pace or two forward, out of his reach. He dared not step on the boards himself.

"I'm all right," I said. "I'll come back if it's no good."

The old lady was beaming and clapping her hands. "Oh, thank you. Thank you, young man. You can save him for me."

The cat was calling frantically and stretching his neck towards me. It wasn't my heroism that impressed him; it was the ripe smell of the haddock.

"You come back here, at once!" called the policeman.

I walked out along the boards to the point where they ended, about ten feet from the bank. There was still the six-foot stretch of bottle-green water between me and the cat.

"Come on, puss," I called, hoping he would jump across to me. "Good puss, come on, puss."

The cat squirmed about and tried to poise for a jump, but the perch was too narrow and he sat back again. He was wilder than ever now for the haddock, though. A rod which had once held the painter was still hanging from the jetty.

I pulled it free, unwrapped the haddock, and tied it on the end with my handkerchief.

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" Blimey," said someone in the crowd. " It's Moby Dick."

I reached out as far as I could and dangled the fish in front of the cat. It stretched its neck madly, beat the air with its front paws and then, unable to resist any longer, gathered itself, and leapt for the jetty. I jerked the rod back but I wasn't quick enough: the cat landed on the haddock, dug in, and hung by its claws. The sudden weight pulled the rod down and sideways; I grabbed it with both hands, heaved with all my strength—lost my balance—teetered for a moment—and then fell, haddock, cat, and all, down into the canal.

I landed feet first and, thanks to the rubbish in the water, I only went in up to my knees. The cat and the fish went under but the handkerchief held and I managed to pull them behind me on the rod as I waded ashore. The old lady held out her umbrella and, with its help, and the policeman's hand under my collar, I got up the bank and onto the path.

My legs, the cat, and the haddock were covered in dark green mud. The old lady grabbed the cat, circling its stomach with a sheet of newspaper.

" Oh, you poor, poor thing. Thank goodness, you're safe at last." She turned to me. " And you're a good, brave boy. You deserve a reward and I'll see you get one. Now you must come home with me and get out of those wet things." She grabbed me by the hand and made off at a smart trot. " Keep the circulation going. You never know. My name is Sarah Petticombe, *Miss* Sarah Petticombe."

I squelched along beside her, holding the rod out in front of me like a lance so that the mud wouldn't get on my clothes. The haddock swayed aloft like a great green banner. I felt like something out of a pantomime.

It was a big house, mouldering and grey, set back at the end of a lane. There was moss on the path and the garden was haunted by weed-hung trees. We went through the hall and into the kitchen. I sat on the table while she washed my socks and put them before the fire to dry.

" We must find something for your feet," she said thoughtfully. " We haven't any men about the house. There's just Judith and me, she's my sister."

She left the room and came back in a minute carrying what, to me, looked like a pair of Russian boots such as ladies wore at the time, calf-length, high-heeled boots. " I'm afraid these are the best I can do. I think Father got them in Brazil."

I put them on. They were loose, but wearable, although the high heels were a bit tricky.

She knelt down beside the cat and wiped it with a towel. I

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hobbled over to the sink and washed my haddock under the tap. The mud came away readily enough and, except for the scars of the cat's claws and a new undertone of unforgettable river-smell, it was as good as new.

"There you are," said Miss Sarah, picking up the cat. "That's better. Now you're ready to join your new friends."

"Friends?" I said. "Have you got more cats?"

"Oh yes. Lots more. And all Abyssinians, you know. Would you like to see them?"

"Yes. I would." An idea was creeping up on me.

"They're in the conservatory. Judith says I can keep them as long as they stay in the conservatory. So be careful not to let any of them get into the house."

I followed her through a door on the other side of the hall and into a derelict greenhouse. There were no plants on the shelves. Instead, there were cats. Big cats, small cats, bushy cats, smooth cats, black cats, tabby cats, cats of every make and size were draped along the staging. They were clearly delighted to see her and all leapt to the floor and came towards us, purring thunderously. She knelt down, arms outstretched, to welcome them.

A gaunt monster with one eye, one ear, and the smile of a tiger came on past her and made purposefully for me. My jersey was alive with the smell of haddock and he plainly intended to eat me. I stepped back through the door and slammed it in his teeth.

I heard her talking to the cats for a minute and then she came out and joined me.

"You shouldn't be frightened," she said. "They wouldn't hurt you. They can tell you're kind to animals."

"Where did you get all those cats?" I asked.

"I find them. People are very cruel, you know. They just turn their cats out into the street and leave them to starve." She looked very sad.

"How many are there?"

"Seventeen—perhaps one or two more."

"It must be an awful job getting enough food for all that lot."

"It is. It worries me sometimes. But there's neighbours' scraps, and skinnings from the fishmonger. And I find things . . ."

Back in the kitchen, I picked up the haddock. It looked as if I'd found a market for leviathan.

"I just bought this for the family for dinner," I said. "But I don't think they could eat it now. Not after it's been in the canal. I'll have to ask my father for some more money and buy something else."

My voice quavered tearfully and I looked as pinched and woebegone as my face would permit. "If he can afford it, that is,

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being out of work and us not being very well off anyway." I sighed heavily, and looked despairingly at the floor.

Then a faint hope came to me, I looked up at her, bravely, wistfully. "It might do for the cats, though. They could eat it. I suppose—I suppose you wouldn't take it . . .?"

Miss Sarah clapped her hands. "That's it. I'll buy it for the cats, and everything will be all right. How much is the haddock worth?"

"Three and six," I said. She said what was it *worth*, not what did it cost. And you'd have deserved a shilling profit if you'd been through what I'd been through with that fish.

"Three and six," she said. "It's a very fine fish for the money. My goodness, that reminds me—the reward. I haven't given you your reward yet."

She rummaged in her bag for her purse. "Shall we say another three and six for the reward? Now, let me see, three and six and three and six makes . . . makes six and six . . ."

"Seven shillings," I said.

"So it does. And seven shillings it shall be."

I needn't have slipped in that shilling on the haddock price after all. I felt a bit of a heel, but not enough to withdraw it. At last, she found the purse and emptied it on to the table. A shilling and four pennies rolled out. She poked into a fold and found another halfpenny.

"Oh, what a nuisance! No change again. But never mind, you take the one and fourpence halfpenny and I'll give you the rest when Judith comes in. She'll be home any minute now."

I pocketed the money. A bird in the hand.

"Now," she said, "let's cook it and feed the cats." She looked around doubtfully. "I'm afraid I don't know much about cooking. Judith does it mostly. I generally wash up."

I took the operation in hand and boiled the haddock in a great copper preserving-pan. The steam came up like yellow thunder, and the foam was pale turquoise—that was the canal water coming through. The cats scratched urgently at the door as the smell drifted out. They must have thought it was Christmas.

When it was done, I flaked it and served a portion on each of the seventeen plates Miss Petticombe had lined up. As she loaded them onto a tray, I looked out of the window and saw an old lady coming up the path. She was smaller than Miss Sarah and had none of her sprightliness. She walked slowly and seemed very weary. I heard the front door open, just as Miss Sarah was crossing the hall with the tray.

"There you are, Judith," she said brightly. "I've had such an exciting morning."

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Judith's voice was sharp in alarm. "Where did you get all that fish, Sarah? You promised me—"

"Now, it's all right," Sarah broke in nervously. "He's a good brave boy. There was a poor cat out there in the canal and he saved it and dropped his haddock in the water. So I bought it from him for the cats. I'm sorry if it was wrong, Judith, but what else could I do?"

She began to cry a little and plucked at her lips with her fingers. Her sister pushed a tired hand across her forehead. "All right," she sighed. "Don't cry now. I won't be cross with you. But you must try and remember what I tell you, dear. Things are so difficult now. The money's gone and I can't do the sewing any more. We really can't—" She suddenly remembered me and stopped. "You'll excuse us for a moment, young man?"

"Yes," I said. "Certainly."

They went out into the hall, Judith pulled the door to behind her, but I put my ear to the crack and heard them whispering together.

"Now, tell me," said Judith, "how much did you tell the boy you'd pay him for the fish?"

"I can't remember."

"Yes, you can. Just try hard."

"I said I'd pay him a reward as well for saving the cat."

"Yes, I know. But how much did you say you'd give him altogether?"

"I think it was seven and six."

"*Seven and six!* I haven't even got that much in my purse. Oh, it's really too bad of you, Sarah. I'll just have to take it out of the coal-money."

Sarah began to whimper softly.

"Now don't cry any more, dear," said Judith. "You go and see your cats and I'll get the money."

Well, that's the way it goes. That's economics for you. Five minutes ago, a market for the haddock, half a crown to flash in the face of the old man, and four and six clear profit. The real big boy. And now I was back in the old routine. No haddock, no half-crown, no profit, and my shoes full of canal water.

I took the one and fourpence halfpenny out of my pocket and put it on the table. Then I picked up my shoes and socks, climbed out of the window, and ran off down the path.

I was delayed on my way back by the Russian boots. They were designed more for seduction than flight and I had to stop at the Elephant and fight a boy who called me Clara Bow. It was

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after two when I reached home ground and the pubs were turning out.

Two men were sitting on the hearthstoned step of the Boar's Head. One was my father; the other his friend, Mr. Murphy. Both were drunk. They were quietly singing a sad song, a lament for dark Rosaleen. That was a good sign. They were past the dancing stage, past the politics, and the fighting, and the liberty of the individual. I could always handle them when they got to singing about dark Rosaleen.

"Look at me, Fiddler," said my father dolefully. "The sorrowfullest man in all the world. The man who beat his only son about the head with a haddock. Like this I did it . . ." He swung back-handed and knocked Mr. Murphy's hat off. "Smack! And off he goes, Fiddler, with no more than a light threat on my life, off into the cold and dark of the night."

"Oh! The cold and the dark of it," mourned Mr. Murphy.

"And the minute I'd done it, I was sorry. But he was up and out of it before I could think of the soft words. I've not seen him since and I'm like to go to my grave without sight of him." He pulled a handful of money from his pocket. "Find him for me, Fiddler. I'll pay you well. There's no sum of gold you can't have . . ."

Murphy pushed away the proffered hand and the coins spilt out over the pavement. "I'll not take money from my best friend. I'll find him. For friendship, not for gold." He broke into quiet song. "*If you live I'll find you . . .*"

"Thank you, Fiddler," said my father gravely. "'Tis more than I deserve. My name should be writ in God's black book."

"Come on," I said. "There's a copper watching you and you'll be down in his black book if you don't get moving."

I pulled on my father's lapels to get him started. He flung his arms around my neck and hugged me like a bear.

"It's my boy, Fiddler. It's my boy come back to me in my hour of need. The one I never thought to see again."

"Saints!" said Murphy, looking at my boots. "And he's ridden on horseback to get to you!"

"No," said my father. "They're seaboots. 'Tis often he's threatened me with running off to sea."

I struggled free from his embrace. Another minute that close and I'd have been drunk as well. I heaved at him again and he came to his feet. A few more coins trickled from his pocket. I held him steady with one hand and picked them up with the other.

"That's my boy for you. Looking after my money for me. Your mother would have been proud of you. And sad ashamed

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of my own behaviour. I dropped some more money before you came. Fiddler knocked it from me—"

"I've got it," I said.

"All of it?"

"Yes. All of it. I'll put it back in your pocket for you."

And I dropped the money back into his jacket pocket—all except half a crown.

I kept that for myself. Later, when he was sober, I'd give it back to him, with due ceremony and appropriate explanation, as his refund on the haddock. He'd feel worse than ever then about having clipped me with it. My honour would be restored, economics would be vindicated, and we'd live happily ever after till the next bust-up.

So we walked on down the road, my father leaning on me, but carrying himself fine and straight considering, and Mr. Murphy stepping behind, shaking his head in wonder and swearing softly in admiration of my Russian boots.

* * *

ANSWERS to PRESENT LAUGHTER on page 72

1. *St. Nicholas (contracted to Santa Claus), a 4th-century bishop; he is their patron saint and bears the same emblem.*
2. *Melchior, "king of light"; Gaspar (or Caspar), "the white one"; Balthazar, "the lord of treasures"*
3. *The Greeks (on account of their gift of a wooden horse to the Trojans); Virgil, the Latin poet*
4. *a. bad name; b. good advice; c. due*
5. *Deal, Dover, and Harwich—allegedly because of the scandalous impositions practised in those parts upon visiting seamen.*
6. *i. give someone a beating (Irish)*
   ii. tell a tall story (American)
   iii. go for a drink
   iv. give someone the glad eye (American)

SOLUTION to ARGOSY CROSSWORD on page 144

Across. 1, *Fan-tail.* 5, *Support.* 9, *Bacchus.* 10, *Amulets.* 11, *Lustier.* 12, *Deprave.* 13, *Pantomime dame.* 14, *And a partridge.* 21, *Pounced.* 22, *Cognate.* 23, *Usher in.* 24, *Initial.* 25, *Giselle.* 26, *Greylag.*

Down. 1, *Fibula.* 2, *Nicosia.* 3, *A Christmas Carol.* 4, *Lustrum.* 5, *Stardom.* 6, *Plum-pudding time.* 7, *Overarm.* 8, *Tester.* 15, *Noughts.* 16, *Andante.* 17, *Ticking.* 18, *Glacial.* 19, *Sprung.* 20, *Sea-leg.*

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COPPER JUNGLE

On this menacing new planet
he was an interloper—and alone

BY ROBERT CRANE

THEY were both pale as the cylinder touched down. They looked strange—young men with the faces of stubborn old men. As the tripod landing-gear sank into the soft ground they were silent. Still in silence, they unclasped their harness, stretched themselves, and grimly set to work.

The cylinder was made fast, anchored by its hydraulic spikes. Philip Thompson, big and powerfully built, cranked out the antennae.

Geoffrey Grant, slighter, quicker in his movements, sat at the control desk activating the various groups of test equipment.

After a moment Geoffrey said, "I'm ready to call *Albatross*."

"Good."

"What shall I say?"

Philip replied curtly, "Tell them the facts."

"This is history, Philip. This is for posterity. The first message."

Philip turned away. "You're in charge. Say whatever you like."

Geoffrey stared at him and hesitated, puzzled by his manner. Then he pressed the transmitter switch abruptly and spoke into the microphone.

"Advance Landing-Craft to H.M. Spaceship *Albatross*: Landing secure. Repeat: Landing secure. We are ready to go ahead. Over."

That's right, Philip thought bitterly. Dress it up. Make it sound really dramatic.

From the parent ship, floating two hundred miles overhead, came the answering signal. "*Albatross* to Advance Landing-Craft: Well done. Receiving you loud and clear. Awaiting your reports. Good luck."

Geoffrey switched the transmitter to stand-by, and sat gazing through the thick plastic window at the lifeless coppery landscape outside.

Philip snapped at him, "Well? What do we do now? Open the champagne and drink toasts to each other?"

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Geoffrey laughed. "Relax, Philip."

"Relax, hell. We have only twelve hours. We can't afford to waste time."

Geoffrey said, "All right. Get ready to unhitch Moru."

"I've been ready to unhitch Moru for twenty minutes."

"Listen," Geoffrey said, his voice suddenly sharp, "calm down. I'm jittery, too, but we'll wreck everything if we go on like this. So calm down, Philip. Carry on with Moru."

"Geoff—"

"You heard me. Carry on with Moru."

"I heard you." The big man leaned over the desk, facing the monitor screen.

Moru was named from the initials of its official title: Mobile Reconnaissance Unit. It was designed to operate by remote control from the cylinder, double-checking on the test equipment and supplying direct visual records of the landing-site. It looked comical when it was in operation, like a fat man wearing a black suit and a bowler hat, rolling along on one short flexible leg.

Philip released it from the underside of the cylinder and guided it through the tripod landing-gear. He said, "I'm setting it for slow continuous circuits. Twenty yards' radius to start with, increasing by tens." He was suppressing his rage somehow, holding his hatred in check.

Geoffrey nodded.

Moru moved out steadily and pivoted in its sure-footed way to make the first circuit. It could travel up to an effective distance of two miles: at twenty yards it was merely idling.

On the control panel inside the cylinder, indicator needles began to creep degree by degree across the dials of meters, and a brownish-gold picture appeared on the screen. Philip and Geoffrey sat side by side, watching and waiting for manifestations of danger.

This was the fourth visit man had made here; but previously he had not touched solid land. This was Expedition D. D for Decision, D for Descent, D for Development.

Albatross carried, besides its crew, thirty-six passengers—among them Philip's wife and Geoffrey's wife—young, healthy, intelligent men and women, all filled with zeal to pioneer a great new civilization.

They were waiting only for the final words from the two men in the Advance Landing-Craft—"Conditions favourable," or the alternative, "Conditions not favourable." If it was the latter, confirmed by data from the test instruments and the mobile reconnaissance unit, Expedition D would turn back. The two men, expendable by free choice, would be left behind.

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There was no way of retrieving them. The big cylinder could go down. It could not go up.

The camera in Moru's sturdy spherical chest reported back to the monitor in the Advance Landing-Craft, and from there the image was relayed automatically to *Albatross* so that there was no need for any running commentary by the two men.

At present the screen showed nothing more than they could see for themselves. The landing had been a perfect pinpoint, on a flat loamy beach about a hundred yards from the shore of a lake which had already been named Lake Hope. The beach had been named for its shape, Fingernail Beach. It was rather more than half a mile wide and fairly clear of vegetation; but it was surrounded by an arc of dense jungle-like growth.

To Philip it looked like a clearing on the upper stretches of the Amazon, except for the colour. Everything was tinged with copper: the ground, the lake, the encircling forest, even the sky. It seemed to blaze in the air. Copper. A copper world.

Geoffrey suddenly looked up from the control desk and said, smiling, " At least it's easy on the eyes. What do you think? "

Philip grunted. He noticed that Geoffrey's fingers were drumming nervously against the edge of the desk.

" It's a little spooky, though," Geoffrey went on. " I mean—"

Philip cut across his explanation. " You mean you're scared."

" Scared? Am I? I suppose I am. Aren't you? "

Philip thought, I knew it. He could see clearly how scared Geoffrey was—the white face, the gauntness, the quick uneasy smile, the drumming fingers. Coward, Philip thought.

He said, " The atmosphere's all right, isn't it? "

Geoffrey glanced at the dials. " Seems to be."

" I'm going out," Philip said. " I want to walk round. I'm tired of being boxed up in here."

" Good lord, Philip, you're still acting as if you're punch-drunk, space-drunk—"

" I'm going to take a walk," Philip said roughly. " I'm not scared of anything outside—"

" Stay where you are! " Geoffrey said. " I give the orders here. You leave this cylinder when I say you can, and not before."

Philip wanted to kill him.

He had hated Geoffrey for several weeks now. He did not know exactly why. Before the journey started he had admired him: they had sailed boats together, gone on fishing-trips together, sat together drinking and yarning night after night. He had looked on Geoffrey as an elder brother—an elder brother who was quick, fearless, incorruptible.

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But on the journey something had changed this unquestioning admiration. A week out from Earth the thirty-six passengers on *Albatross* had entered into what was officially known as the Rest Period. Their metabolism had been slowed down almost to zero by injections, so that they were to all intents de-energized. They scarcely moved, they required the barest minimum of food; there was no deterioration of tissue, no ageing process took place. Some wit called it the Embalmment.

Albatross's journey was scheduled to take twenty-seven months. The metabolic slow-down was enforced for nearly two years. Philip could remember it vaguely as a long pleasant sunny day; the sensation was like dozing on the sands somewhere in the Bahamas. In the most tenuous way he was aware that his wife, Anne, was beside him, although he was too lazy to turn and look at her; and that Geoffrey and Betty Grant were somewhere near.

In that sunny, relaxed state he must have dreamt a great deal. Most of these dreams were about Geoffrey. He and Geoffrey had already been selected to make the advance landing, and he dreamt that something went wrong after the descent, and it was Geoffrey's fault.

He dreamt that Geoffrey suddenly went into a panic, and climbed out of the cylinder and went running hysterically into the jungle, leaving Philip alone.

He dreamt that he saw his wife and Geoffrey dancing together, dreamt that he heard her whisper to him, " I love you, I don't love Philip." Mostly, though, he dreamt of Geoffrey failing the expedition in some way, and of disaster following.

In the last three months of the journey these dreams remained with him. These were months of activity: physical rehabilitation, landing-rehearsals, planning. One evening the Senior Medical Officer on *Albatross* addressed the passengers and said, " I want to explain about a recently discovered phenomenon associated with the Rest Period which may be troubling some of you, and that is a psychological disturbance due to mental over-activity."

He went into a long explanation of the causes, and ended, " If any of you have any problems which you think may have arisen during the Rest Period I shall be happy to discuss them with you."

Many of the passengers requested appointments. Philip did not. He was convinced that his suspicions of Geoffrey were justified. There were many times when he wanted to kill Geoffrey.

Outside, Moru continued to make widening circuits without any pause; and the dials on the control desk remained steady.

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The monitor showed the same landscape, lush, lifeless, coppery.

Geoffrey said cheerfully, " It looks good."

Philip did not reply.

" No evidence of copper," Geoffrey said. " The boys in the back room must be right."

There had been more than a dozen reports about the copper coloration. The summing-up had been that vegetable life existed abundantly, and the atmosphere was probably capable of supporting human life. No evidence was seen of anything approximating to human or animal life, though—no trails, no geometric clearings, no heavily grazed areas.

The principal mineral deposit seemed to be bauxite which, in certain circumstances, could be brownish in colour. The spectroscope showed no abnormal copper deposits anywhere. The overall copper tinge was therefore believed to be due to a photosynthetic substance contained in the vegetation; a variation in colour, particularly to a reddish colour, was easily possible. On Earth it was green: here it was copper.

Whether the human system could tolerate it or not remained to be seen.

Philip said, " If it looks so good, why don't we go out? "

" You know the routine. We're expected to spend the first hour in observation."

" We've been anchored for more than an hour already."

" Forty-one minutes," Geoffrey said. " Look at the chronometer."

Philip did not look at the chronometer. His body was quivering as he gazed through the window. He wanted to go running out now to end all uncertainty. Forget about instruments, forget about remote-control surveys by a robot. Plunge out there quickly, breathe the air, wade into the lake, crash into the vegetation, shouting with all his might, " I'm here, I'm here! "

He would know within a couple of minutes whether this planet could support life. If not, it was just too bad. That was the risk you knowingly took when you volunteered for the assignment. Why prolong the agony?

Geoffrey said, " Go ahead with Stage Two."

" What's the point? I'm ready to go out there right now—"

" Yes, yes," Geoffrey said wearily. " But this is the sequence *Albatross* expects us to follow. Carry on with Stage Two."

Philip silently pulled out a cage containing two white rabbits. Behind the wire mesh they were bright-eyed, twitchy, submissive, yet very alive. He lowered them into the air-lock and then pressed the relay switch that opened the lower trap. The cage fell onto the soft loam, and its sides dropped automatically.

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For a few seconds nothing happened. Then the two little creatures came hopping out timidly, stopped with their ears flattened back, sniffed at the ground, and went hopping on.

Geoffrey cried exultantly, "Look at that!"

Philip was watching them closely. They nibbled at a plant, scampered a little way, stopped to chew on more of the copper foliage, hopped on again side by side. The air seemed to make them unusually frisky.

Geoffrey said, "We'll give them five minutes. Then I'll call *Albatross*."

For five minutes the two men stood staring out of the window. Then Geoffrey sat down, with a deep sigh; there were beads of sweat on his forehead. He said, "Thank God for that," and reached forward to the microphone.

"Wait a moment!" Philip said, and snatched up a pair of binoculars.

"What's wrong?" Geoffrey said in alarm.

Philip handed the binoculars to him. One of the rabbits was still munching unconcernedly, but the other had collapsed into a stiff heap. Its hind legs were outstretched, its head was twisted to one side.

"What happened to it?" Geoffrey said. His alarm had changed to anger. "What happened to it?"

"I'm going to find out."

"No!"

"Try to stop me."

Geoffrey said, "All right. You can go, but it's on your own responsibility."

"Thanks," Philip said.

"You'll take oxygen and a radio. Boots. Gloves. You'll keep in touch with me every second you're out there."

"Very well," Philip said in the same ironical tone. "Thanks very much."

He found to his surprise that when he was outside the cylinder he had difficulty in walking. All his muscles seemed to have stiffened, his skin had thickened like old parchment; he had to force himself forward by a lunging effort of will. Perfectly natural, he told himself. First time I've walked on solid ground for more than two years. Gravity effect.

But it was something more than gravity effect. This heaviness, this physical reluctance was connected in some way with his dreams during the long Rest Period. He felt as if he had lived this scene before, walking out alone across a stretch of empty beach. The first man to walk on this planet . . . and unknown terror awaiting him.

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The rabbit was dead. He stood looking down at it blearily. Its mate had not moved at his approach.

Geoffrey's voice said in his ears, " Well? "

He answered into his microphone mouthpiece, " It's dead."

" Bring it back with you. We'll do an autopsy, check its lungs. Keep your gloves on, Philip. Don't touch anything without your gloves—"

" Wait a minute," Philip said. He turned the rabbit over with his foot, and as he did so something whirred and hit the side of his boot. He jumped back, swearing.

" What's wrong? " Geoffrey called.

" Something struck," Philip said. " Like a snake." And then he saw it, near the rabbit's body: a small red thing like an elongated praying mantis, with curved horny pincers. He made a sudden leap and crushed it, and felt it break under his heavy boot like a dry twig. He said into his microphone, " It wasn't a snake. Some kind of insect, more like a scorpion."

" That means there's life here," Geoffrey said.

" Yes."

" You think it was this scorpion killed the rabbit? Not the atmosphere? "

" We'll soon know," Philip answered, and in one sharp movement he pulled his respirator loose. He sucked the air in, exhaled, sucked in more until the pressure hurt his chest. What had the experts said about this atmosphere? Probably capable of sustaining human life. Probably. This was the surest test.

It hit his brain like alcohol. He went staggering across the soft beach without any sense of direction; the sky was whirling around his head and his arms were flapping like a windmill. The next thing he knew, he was standing knee-deep in the lake, laughing wildly as he splashed water onto his face. He scooped some of the cold liquid into his mouth and then walked calmly back to the cylinder.

Geoffrey said, " I thought you'd gone crazy out there, pulling off your respirator and drinking the water."

" I'm still alive, aren't I? "

" We're supposed to go about this job in a logical way. Step by step. There's no need for heroics."

" The air's good. The water's good. I proved something. What more could you want? "

Geoffrey said, " I'd better make a report to *Albatross*." He spoke briefly to the parent ship, and *Albatross* commented, " Carry on. Don't take any unnecessary risks at this stage."

Geoffrey switched off and said, " I'm going out now."

" I'll go along."

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" No. You'll stay here. Until we're sure about this territory one man will at all times remain in the cylinder."

" It's safer for two out there than for one."

" Our primary function is to report to *Albatross*," Geoffrey said. " Get that into your head."

Philip said sulkily, " All right."

" Furthermore, we'll always carry a weapon when either of us goes out on reconnaissance. If there are scorpions, there are probably other things too. Bigger and nastier." He searched around for a long machete which was intended for cutting down vegetation. " We'll start with this. If we find anything too big we'll take to the rifles and flame-thrower."

Philip watched him as he left the cylinder and walked towards the lake. He walked very slowly and warily, as if he expected to be attacked. He was carrying sample-bottles; the machete was tucked in his belt.

Scared, Philip thought, scared out of his wits. But for some reason sweat began to run down his forehead; his hands, holding the binoculars, were wet. He saw Geoffrey stoop down, fill the bottles at the edge of the lake, and then pause as if he were inspecting something.

Philip called instantly, " What is it? "

Geoffrey's voice came back through the control-desk loud-speaker. " Looks like a water-snail. The shore is littered with them." Philip saw him pick the thing up, break the shell, and lob it out into the water. As it touched the surface there was a swirl and a tremendous splash.

" Did you see that! " Geoffrey shouted.

" Must have been a fish."

" Food! " Geoffrey cried. " Food! " He went on throwing out more of the snails, until the surface of the lake boiled with action. " The water's alive with them! " he called. " I can see them here in the shallows. Big things, like muskies."

He began to wade out.

" Keep away from them! " Philip said urgently. " They might take your foot off. Keep out of the water."

Geoffrey waved cheerily, and said, " All right." He turned at once. Philip stood at the control desk watching rigidly, and he did not relax until Geoffrey was back again in the cylinder. He said angrily to Geoffrey, " You damn fool," and swung away, not wishing Geoffrey to see his face.

The night came very suddenly. Almost without warning, the coppery light changed to blazing red, and then to grey and then to oppressive blackness. Moru was brought in close, circling the

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cylinder protectively at fifteen yards' radius. Synchronizing with these circuits, a big black-light floodlamp turned slowly on top of the cylinder so that the monitor screen still showed a dim but intelligible picture of the lake and the wide arc of the surrounding jungle.

The two men watched the screen hour after hour. Nothing significant happened. Philip thought he saw shapes crawling up from the lake but, whatever they were, they did not come close enough to be seen clearly. As the night wore on he became increasingly irritable. He thought of his wife Anne waiting above in *Albatross*. He thought constantly of Geoffrey. The jealousy revived; the hatred sprang up again; spasms of nausea racked his stomach and then subsided.

Just before dawn there was a violent hailstorm. When it stopped, the world outside showed in a thin coppery light, wet and strange and unknown. Philip stared at it in an agony of doubt and for the first time thought: What are we doing here? Why did we come?

Albatross signalled, " We have decided to go ahead with the main landing immediately. The descent will begin at 1000 hours."

Albatross herself could not land. The descent would be made by gliders. The first, carrying only supplies, would serve as the test drop, controlled entirely by radar. The passengers would follow in a piloted glider; then more supplies and equipment, until *Albatross* had discharged her full cargo. She would head back for Earth, and the colonists would not see her again for six years.

The advance landing-craft was taxied from the centre of the loamy beach and anchored near the eastern boundary of the shore, where the soft dense coppery jungle overhung the water. A winch was made ready and cable laid out, and a radio beacon was set up as a ground marker.

Soon after 0930, *Albatross* passed majestically overhead, a huge complex of girders and tanks surrounding a wasp-bodied hull. Geoffrey, at the control desk in the cylinder, greeted it with a friendly " Welcome," and it signalled back, " Good to see you again. How are things down there? "

" Fine," Geoffrey answered.

Albatross passed out of sight, although the booming of her motors still shook the ground. Then the signal came, " We are turning into position."

" All set," Geoffrey said into the microphone.

At five seconds to ten *Albatross* sent the final signal: " Launching Glider One . . . Glider One away."

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Geoffrey remained at the control desk during the drop. Philip stood waiting outside the cylinder. The routine had been rehearsed hundreds of times on Earth. There was nothing spectacular about it now.

Within two minutes the broad-winged machine came slowly curving down, heeled slightly, wavered, skimmed the top of the jungle and slid into a perfect landing on its long skis. Philip ran out, attached the cable to a ring on its underside, and the cylinder winch hauled it in. The routine went on.

Albatross thundered overhead again, making her mile-wide turn, and signalled, " Are you ready for Glider Two? "

" Ready for Glider Two," Geoffrey replied.

Philip waited tautly. This time the passengers were coming down—the colonists, human beings. His wife Anne was coming down to join him on this new world, and Geoffrey's wife, Betty. This, two minutes of powerless flight, was the climax of the entire expedition.

Gently, *Albatross*, Philip thought; gently does it.

The motors were shaking the ground again as *Albatross* returned. Philip did not see the glider released. He caught sight of it some three hundred yards above the jungle, sailing down smoothly. There was no trace of waver. It was coming in under perfect control as if it were running on rails. He saw it ease down, down; and his heart swelled with exultation and he wanted to shout words of praise to the pilot.

Then, like a nightmare, three monstrous black shapes soared up from the copper trees directly in its path. Philip heard the impact of the bodies driving into the perspex nose of the glider, and saw it swerve sickeningly and dip, tail up, and disappear.

He was shouting madly to Geoffrey, " Come on, come on, let's get to them! "

Geoffrey swung down from the cylinder. " They were birds. They were huge birds—"

" Come on," Philip raged. " Run! "

Geoffrey's face was chalk-white. He said, "Wait a minute. You can't go into that jungle unarmed. God knows what's in there."

" Don't waste time! "

" Listen, Philip, be sensible. You can't go in there unarmed—"

" My wife's in the glider," Philip shouted. " So is your wife. What's the matter with you? " He pulled the machete from his belt. " We've got this. We don't need anything else."

" Wait a moment! You can get lost in that jungle before you go ten yards—"

" *Come on!* "

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Geoffrey said, " I was in radio contact up to the last moment. I'm going back to see if I can get a radio fix on them now."

Incredulously, Philip watched him climb back into the cylinder. He tried to speak, but the words choked inside him. He began to run, head forward, and when he reached the first outcrop of vegetation he plunged into it blindly, slashing from side to side with the machete.

His brain was chaotic with thoughts of Anne and Betty and the other passengers, of the huge birds that had burst against the glider's nose, of Geoffrey's blatant cowardice.

He was scared to come with me, Philip thought. I knew all along that he was scared. Scared to go into the forest. Scared of what's in here. Scared of this whole planet.

The ground underfoot was soggy. Thick tendrils caught at his legs and round his waist and under his chin; his hands were bleeding as if they had been cut by razors; bright blue insects plopped softly against his face. He thought vaguely: There ought to be a path.

But there was no path, there could not possibly be a path, and he realized with a strange new shock that he was the first human being to enter this place.

He could not run after he passed the first outcrop. The growth pressed around him, pulpy and intimate. He swung at it with the long machete, kicked at its roots, drove himself bodily at it, using his shoulders and knees to part it. He found himself enveloped in masses of huge copper leaves, soft, wet, smelling of freshly cut cucumbers. Something fell suddenly on one of his arms, and he brushed it off in a wild gesture as he felt it move.

Every now and then he shouted, " Anne! Anne! " but the sound of his voice was muffled, as if he were shouting under water. The light faded with every yard he advanced: the copper sheen dimmed, became tarnished. He still forced himself on, slashing and shouting like a madman, until his strength failed and he had to stop, his lungs heaving.

Virgin jungle on a virgin planet.

He remembered how it all looked on the aerial photographs he had studied when the expedition was being planned. An immense, smooth, unbroken copper carpet, spreading out from the shores of Lake Hope. Fingernail Beach, like a small clean semicircle, scalloped out of the edge of the carpet. Other, smaller beaches. A stream looping through the carpet, forming a delta where it entered Lake Hope. Other lakes, joined together like a great copper necklace by narrow canals in the jungle.

He could remember wondering how it would feel to be alone in this wilderness. And in some of his dreams, he recalled now, he

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had seen himself alone down here. He had dreamt about it for weeks during the Rest Period on *Albatross*.

Geoffrey, he thought furiously, that damned coward! He was too scared to come in here with me.

Kicking, cutting at the plants in his way, calling again, " Anne! Anne! " he started forward. He nearly trod on a long thin scaly creature like an alligator; it whipped away from him almost before he sensed it was there.

To his right there was suddenly a wild shrieking that turned his blood cold because he was sure it came from the glider; it was rhythmic, though, repeated over and over, and he decided it was some kind of bird, possibly like the three that had caused the crash.

I should kill Geoffrey, he thought. *I should kill him.*

There was life all around, he now realized. Not only the pulpy vegetation. Unimagined life, furtive, menacing. And he was an interloper here, this was not his territory. These monstrous birds, the scaly creature like an alligator, the thing that had killed the rabbit had every right to be hostile.

" Anne! " he called. " Anne! Betty! " and went crashing on. He could not see the sky: it was obscured by a ceiling of fronds and spikes, huge armlike branches, broad and ragged leaves. When he turned to look behind him he could see no evidence of his passage.

The jungle had reluctantly let him through, and closed again. He came without any warning to a small pool into which a small stream trickled; and he wanted to bathe his face, but as he bent down he found that he was afraid to trust his hands in the slowly rippling water. He tried to force his hands to splash the surface: they would not obey his will. He shouted, for the last time, with all his strength, and something mocked him with a derisive chatter.

Then, as he stood in the dark glade, he knew that he was lost.

He shook as he faced the truth. He was lost and scared; and he had been scared ever since he could remember.

He could not go on. The jungle was pressing in on him, and it was useless to bluster any longer. *I have been here before*, he thought: *I have been here many times, in nightmares.* Nightmares that started when he joined the expedition, that continued all through the journey, through the Rest Period, through these hours when he was alone on this world with Geoffrey.

It was not Geoffrey who was scared. He thought, in terrified remorse: I blamed my own jitters on Geoffrey. I wanted to kill him, because *I* was afraid.

The discovery amazed him.

As he thought about it, his mind seemed to clear. He walked

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calmly round the pool and bathed his hands and his face in the water of the little stream that ran into it.

Over to his left he suddenly heard a new noise, and he turned his head sharply to listen. Some big animal coming towards him. In a quick decisive action he wiped the machete clean and crept forward to watch for its approach.

The noise became louder, stirring up a background of odd protesting noises, like small animals squeaking as they scurried out of the way. He stopped, hiding behind a thick clump of leaves.

Then he saw it, big and black and round and comical, thrusting its way through the undergrowth like a fat man wearing a bowler hat hurrying to keep a business appointment: Moru, who never dreamt, who knew nothing of fear. For a split second Philip crouched, wondering how Moru could have entered this wilderness, and then he understood.

Geoffrey was guiding it from the cylinder, directing it like a small bulldozer on a radio beam between the cylinder and the glider. Geoffrey . . . good old Geoffrey . . .

It was a miracle that was not a miracle, a simple matter of radio devices and servo-mechanisms; but he was laughing wildly as he dashed from cover, and when he reached the trundling black sphere he wanted to throw his arms around it. Copper tendrils clung to it in long streamers as if it had passed through a Mardi Gras procession, and he ran alongside, trying to tear them loose so that the mechanism should not choke up. Then he ran ahead, whirling the machete to clear a path so that the miraculous mechanism could move faster, with the least possible hindrance. He was not tired now, he was not afraid; he had forgotten everything. He had one purpose: to clear a path.

The glider was only fifty yards away. He came upon it suddenly, nose down in soft vegetation. The fuselage had remained intact, and the passengers were climbing out onto the starboard wing. He saw his wife up there, and Geoffrey's wife; he shouted to them, and they shouted back to him in thankfulness.

This world is ours, he thought. We've blazed our first trail. Moru did it, and Geoffrey, and I myself.

★ ★ ★

OVERSEAS READERS' COMPETITION

We had asked for an abbreviated versical synopsis of the story readers had most enjoyed, and we only wish we had space to print some of the neat and witty entries. Two guineas apiece to Mrs. B. S. Gillies, Oamaru, New Zealand; to Herbert Horne, Toorak, Melbourne, Australia; and to Mrs. P. B. Hill, Christchurch, New Zealand.

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O! come, come quickly,
And see how trim they daunce, how trim and trickly

THOMAS MORLEY, *1594*

So danced they did,
And dance they could:
Queenie was a marvel,
And the boy was good.
Their step was dreamy, and slow,
And sweeping:
And their rhythm was enough to set you weeping.
They stood up straight, and slim, and tall—
None of your sexy stuff at all:
Queenie was clever:
You should have seen them:
She danced as though there were a sword between them.

But the music swerved.
It sank into deep
Soft murmurs, as though it were falling asleep.
Like a dream, the melody began to float
From a saxophone's low-pitched husky throat:
And the rhythm whispered with the fierce unrest
Of a heart throbbing in a passionate breast.

Then Queenie stirred:
And the stir went through him;
And he shifted his arm,
And crushed her to him.
The shock of her softness stopped his breath.
Lights blurred:
The floor swam underneath.

JOSEPH MONCURE MARCH, *The Wild Party*

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Invitation to the Waltz

He sprang to the stone parapet beside her. " I'll dance with you till you cry out for mercy; I'll dance with you till you faint on the floor at my feet." . . .

Denis and Anna danced the discreet waltz of their day, danced it with a beautiful, grave precision, with perfect circumspection, with composed and masklike faces. But to the alert nerves of the lookers-on, it was as if what they did was shameless. It was as if they danced to a vaster music than Weber's, to a music of fate and death, and triumph and resignation. The fire that was between them escaped to blaze about the room, so that the most obtuse might know that here were lovers.

KATE O'BRIEN, *Without My Cloak*

Cakewalk Chorus

Just then from the doorway, as fat as shotes,
Came the cake-walk princes in their long red coats,
Canes with a brilliant lacquer shine,
And tall silk hats that were red as wine.
And they pranced with their butterfly partners there,
Coal-black maidens with pearls in their hair,
Knee-shirts trimmed with the jassamine sweet,
And bells on their ankles and little black-feet.

VACHEL LINDSAY, *The Congo*

Hep Hebrideans

. . . They kickit and jumpit with mettle extraordinary, and whiskit and friskit, and toed it and go'd it, and twirl'd it and whirl'd it, and stamped it and sweated it, tattooing the floor like mad. The difference between our country dances and these Scottish figures is about the same as leisurely stirring a cup o' tea and beating up a batter pudding. I was extremely gratified to think that, if I had pleasures they knew nothing of, they had also some into which I could not possibly enter.

JOHN KEATS, *Letter, 1818*

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Pas de Deux

Then they started again, Hilda in the solo *adage* with which the ballet opened. Though she should have been unconscious of him, Hilda was very conscious, but when the opening theme ended and he came, in the savage overbearing rush that she had worked out but never seen, she shrank back in real fear and surprise and cried out, " Lion. No! "

" Why? Why, what is the matter? " Lion was angry at being stopped, angrier than he knew. " Why did you stop me? Isn't that right? "

" Yes . . . only . . ."

" Isn't that what you meant? " said Lion, more angry.

" Yes, but . . ."

" But what? What? "

" It's too . . . strong," said Hilda faintly.

" It can't be," said Lion. " It has to be strong. Begin again," he ordered.

She began and this time, though again she had the giddy feeling of being violently overthrown, borne backwards and mastered, she danced with him. " I don't envy her. I shouldn't like to dance that," said Alma later, watching her. " Nor should I," said Rayevskaya, and a great many of the girls in the company agreed with her. " It's too queer," said Alma and Liuba Rayevskaya, her eyes solemn and round, said what they many of them felt, " I think it's shocking." As Hilda danced, more and more her power came up to match Lion until she was dancing so much with him that she was almost . . . " within him," thought Hilda. " It's only a dance," she thought giddily. " It's only a dance." Her hands clung, she felt his thigh lift her, force her, his breath came on her cheek and his head bent over hers. She gave a little gasp. His eyes were shut.

RUMER GODDEN, *A Candle for St. Jude*

Pas de Chat

Minnaloushe runs in the grass
Lifting his delicate feet.
Do you dance, Minnaloushe, do you dance?
When two close kindred meet
What better than call a dance,
Maybe the moon may learn,
Tired of that courtly fashion,
A new dance turn.

W. B. YEATS, *The Cat and the Moon*

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SPADGER'S BLIMP

It looked like a colossal octopus dancing on its toes

BY WILLIAM H. VENABLES

TWO sailors of contrasting stature stood on the platform of the Liverpool Overhead Railway at Herculaneum Station. They were glaring down at the rust-streaked bow of a freighter berthed in the dock below.

"Cor, what a feeder," disgustedly muttered Spadger Hollins, the diminutive one. "'Arf a kipper fer breakfast an' the other 'arf fer tea! That's the last time we fires *'er* boilers, Charlie. Take it from me."

"An' me," grunted Charlie Curtiss, huge and rubicund.

"I b'lieve the stooard owns rows o' 'ouses up Dingle way," continued Spadger with relish. "An' no flippin' wonder, the way 'e fed us."

"Oughter be shot," decided Charlie emphatically.

"By 'eck, what I couldn' do to a plate o' 'Orace 'Awkins's scouse right now," sighed Spadger, turning towards the incoming train. "Tell yer what, Char, what say we goes to 'Orace's an' 'as a feed afore we goes ter the Sailors' 'Ome?"

"Sure, Spadge," agreed Charlie, picking up both their sea-bags and following Spadger into the train.

The pair descended from the Overhead Railway at Brocklebank and strolled along the dock road, turning right towards Horace Hawkins's Select Dining-Rooms.

"'Ere, that's a noo place, ain't it?" demanded Spadger, staring at a shop newly painted in flaring red, its window embellished with the inscription in chrome-yellow:

Percy Lovestick *High-Class Dining-Rooms*

It was situated immediately opposite Horace Hawkins's more sedate establishment.

"Looks like ole 'Orace 'as some oppersition," grunted Spadger.

Entering Horace's, they found their chubby friend cowering behind a table in the empty dining-room. Standing before him, shaking a beringed fist in his face, was a lanky youth in a flamboyant suit, with a streak of moustache and sideboards.

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"If you don't sell out at my price, I'll break you," the dandy was screaming at Horace. "I'll ruin you, sure as God made little apples!"

"Scat 'im, Charlie," urged Spadger.

Charlie Curtiss dropped the seabags and, gripping the young bully by his ample hair and the seat of his pants, propelled him like a hysterical marionette from the shop. Charlie's huge boot gave him added impetus so that he sailed through the air and made an undignified pancake landing in the gutter.

"I'll get me gang to slice you up!" raged the discomfited youth. "An' as for you, Horace Hawkins, I'll burn your bleedin' shop down, see if I don't."

With which final volley he picked himself up and limped into the sanctuary of the garish dining-rooms opposite.

"'Oo the 'eck's Fancy-pants?" Spadger asked, seating himself opposite Horace, who was quietly weeping, head in hands.

"Percy Lovestick," sniffed Horace. "'E made a packet floggin' nylons when 'e were bedroom stooard in the Queens. An' now 'e's pinchin' all me trade."

"Good eats'll always win, 'Orace," said Spadger with conviction. "An' ain't yer the best scouse-maker in the town?"

"Best in the bloomin' world," Charlie amplified loyally.

"Ta, fellers," said Horace, drying his eyes on his apron. "But 'e don't fight fair. 'E's drove all me reglars away. 'Is gang comes in as customers an' lets loose rats an' flippin' cockroaches all over the place. An' twice they've got in at night an' put sugar in me salt cellars. No, boys, 'e's got me beat. An' after all me years o' loyal service ter the workin' man."

Horace's lower lip quivered, and he began to weep again, the mask of tragedy sitting ill but unmistakable on his well-fed face.

"Cheer up, ole boy," Spadger patted Horace's quivering shoulder sympathetically. "Yer troubles is over. Me an' Charlie'll see yer through. You rustle us up some eats while we 'as a think. We're fair famished ter death, an' nothin' thinks better'n a full belly."

Some time later, having consumed two huge plates each of succulent stew, Spadger and Charlie beamed with repletion as they sat back and lit their cigarettes.

"'Orace, me lad," began Spadger, belching happily, "a man as can make scouse like that is a benefact o' mankind."

"It's a art," observed Charlie, sharpening a match to make a toothpick.

"An' another thing," said Spadger, "we ain't goin' ter let a ole shipmate be beat by a spiv like Percy Lovestick, are we, Char ole man?"

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"We ain't, Spadge," agreed Charlie, bunching a fist that might have been carved from a block of mahogany.

"Now, the way I looks at it is this," mused Spadger, his alert eyes narrowing thoughtfully. "Charlie an' me ain't signed in at the Sailors' 'Ome yet, so if you can put us up 'ere o' nights, 'Orace, me an' Charlie'll see that Percy an' 'is gang don't get up to no mischief. An' we'll mix wi' the customers when the meals is on. 'Ow's that, 'Orace?"

"Yer good pals," said Horace, shaking his head sadly. "But it's too late. I ain't got no customers no more. The on'y one this week was a brush-seller what 'ad got 'isself lost. An' 'e on'y 'ad a cuppa tea. An' the sugar basin was fulla salt. No, boys, ta all the same, but it's the shutters fer me."

"Not blinkin' likely," snorted Spadger. "We'll get yer customers back. We—we'll advertise!"

"Percy Lovestick 'as adverts in the Number One buses," said Horace dismally.

"That's ord'nary advertisin'," retorted Spadger contemptuously. "What I mean is somethin' what the 'ole town'll see. Like them there aeryplanes what flies in America pullin' banners sayin' *Drink Upsicoka*, an' the like."

"We couldn' afford to 'ire no aeryplane, Spadge." Charlie shook his head.

"No, but I knows where we can borrer a b'loon." Spadger winked knowingly.

"A b'loon!" exclaimed Charlie and Horace simultaneously.

"Yes," Spadger preened himself. "A bloomin' big b'loon. Yer remembers that there Capting Lemmy what used ter fly them funny aeryplanes from Seaforth Sands when we was kids? Pioneer o' aeryplanes, 'e was. Well, 'e used ter fly in a b'loon afore 'e got 'is aeryplanes."

"Blimey, but that's years ago," snorted Charlie. "More'n forty years ago!"

"Sure," smiled Spadger, still in command of the situation "An' the feller what buyed Lemmy's shed when 'e died was that chippy we 'ad in the *Simian*, Joe Spragg. 'E swallered the anchor an' started a joinerin' business.

"I worked fer Joe once, but I were no good makin' chairs. But I remembers all the bits o' ole aeryplane 'ung about the shed. An' a big 'eap o' rubbery cloth covered in a fish-net in one corner o' the shed. I'll bet Joe Spragg'd be glad ter get it outa 'is way."

"But what the 'eck could we do wi' this 'ere b'loon?" demanded Charlie.

"We could moor it in the backyard an' fly it over the roof wi' a sign 'angin' from it, couldn' we, 'Orace?"

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"I dunno, Spadge," groaned Horace, completely out of his depth. "I'm sure I dunno."

The following afternoon, Spadger and Charlie, pulling a laden handcart, and a retinue of hilarious schoolboys, halted outside Horace Hawkins's Select Dining-Rooms.

"Gawd Awmighty," moaned Spadger, glaring at the musty-smelling mound of oiled silk and netted rope which overflowed the handcart, "I never guessed a empty b'loon could be so bloomin' 'eavy!"

"It just shows the wonders o' science," said Charlie, mopping his brow. "'Ow the 'eck that thing can be lighter'n air fair beats me."

The task of dragging the slippery gasbag through the shop and into Horace's backyard surged their tempers to flash-point. Their audience of schoolboys was augmented by Percy Lovestick and several of his teddy-boy cronies who brought out chairs and sat in front of the rival dining-rooms, dispensing ribald advice, and cheering heartily when Spadger nearly got strangled in the netting.

Eventually the unwieldy contraption lay spread across Horace's backyard in a circular heap, a dining-room chair intricately woven into its netting.

"I thought as 'ow there was a basket thing what yer sat in," mused Charlie, struggling with the enmeshed chair.

"The rats'd het it," replied Spadger. "Anyways, we don't need no basket. Now, Char, while I fills the b'loon, you get some ole sacks an' fill 'em wi' soil."

While Charlie filled the ballast bags, Spadger uncoiled the garden hose with which the hygienic Horace daily swilled his yard.

One end he pushed up the tail of the balloon, the other he took into the kitchen and connected to the gas-stove jet. Hopefully he turned on the jet.

At first there was only a gentle hissing and a powerful smell of gas, then came the crepitation of rubbing silk as the gasbag began to unfold itself. Barely perceptibly its contour began to tremble and breathe until, after half an hour, it simulated a monstrous gurgling jellyfish, glossy and slimy-looking in the moonlight.

"It'll fill durin' the night," said Spadger confidently.

By now it was dark enough for him to climb over the wall of the adjacent timber-yard and borrow a thirty-fathom coil of rope. One end of the rope he fastened to the basket-ring on the balloon's netting, the other end he tied to Horace's mangle.

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"I 'ope to 'eck that's 'eavy enough," he muttered, eyeing the mangle dubiously. Later that evening, while Charlie nursed the travailing balloon, Spadger sat in the kitchen painting letters on a banner made of three table-cloths sewn together. Horace was sitting beside the gas-meter putting shillings in the slot.

"That's three quids o' bobs I've put in now," moaned Horace. "An' the blasted b'loon ain't 'igher than the kitchen winder yet."

"Trust yer Uncle Spadger," came the placid reply. "We'll fly the b'loon just afore the dockers knocks off fer their dinners termorrer. All you've gotta do, 'Orace me lad, is fill all yer pans wi' the tastiest grub yer've ever cooked."

Just then Charlie rushed in excitedly. "Hey, Spadge!" he cried. "I just seen that there Percy Lovestick peekin' over the wall. 'E were laffin' 'is 'ead off, until I 'eaved a brick at 'im."

"Blimey, I 'opes 'e don't get up t' no mischief wi' our b'loon!" exclaimed Spadger. "We'd better keep watch all night."

In view of Horace's nervous disposition, and the arduous professional labours that would be required of him in the morning, Spadger sent him to bed while he and Charlie took turns guarding the slowly inflating balloon and putting shillings in the slot.

The night passed without untoward incident, but at dawn Spadger was chagrined to find that as yet only the top of the balloon was filled, most of the fabric still depending flaccidly from the bubble at the summit. Nevertheless the balloon was straining at its ballast and trying to soar, squirming and squeaking as it scratched its back against the guttering of the roof. It looked like a colossal octopus dancing on its toes.

"Crikey, what a stink!" muttered Spadger. "The blinkin' gas is leakin' out quicker'n it's goin' in. Flippin' good job it's on'y gotta carry a banner."

Fairly satisfied, he went into the dining-room where Horace had prepared a lavish breakfast of bacon and eggs. Charlie and he were sitting in the place of honour nearest the window.

"Hey, what's that there Percy feller up to?" demanded Charlie, staring through the window. They could see Percy Lovestick pasting up a large notice. He stood back to admire it.

Grand Firework Display at Noon. Free for All.

"Cor!" Spadger spluttered mirthfully "Flippin' fireworks! They'll be over in a few flashes; but our b'loon'll stay up all day, every day. Percy'll 'ave ter think 'arder than that!"

Just before noon it was apparent that the balloon had abandoned any ambition to increase its volume, but it was frantic in its endeavours to escape to the heavens.

"Awright, Charlie, untie the bags," commanded Spadger.

Together they started untying the ballast bags. One was left

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when the balloon, hissing from its perished fabric, tore itself from their hands and soared with joyous abandon into the air. Swept by the wind over the rooftop, it floated high above the street, pulling excitedly at its anchor rope.

" Crikey, grab the mangle! " yelled Spadger.

Charlie threw his weight on the mangle, which was careering across the yard, bouncing as it fought the pull of the balloon. He held it while Spadger loaded it with ballast bags.

" Cor," chuckled Spadger. " That there b'loon don't know its own strength! "

Delightedly, they scampered through the shop into the street and gazed aloft. Beneath the balloon the banner proudly waved its slogan:

Horace Hawkins for Eats like Mum's

Horace beamed as he saw his name borne aloft for all the world to see. Along the road from the docks the workmen surged towards their midday meal, pointing excitedly at the glinting peg-top dancing in the sky.

Just then there came a hissing and flashing from the windows above Percy Lovestick's dining-rooms. A brace of rockets raced high into the air. One burst prematurely in a scintillating display of coloured stars. The other, as if under gravitational influence, curved inexorably towards the balloon.

Horrified, Spadger and his friends saw their balloon explode with a blinding flash, and a blast that rattled the windows for a mile around. Like a diving gannet, the ballast bag plummeted through the window of Percy Lovestick's High-Class Dining-Rooms. The burning fabric descended more gracefully, guided by the wind, until it draped Percy's roof, blazing merrily.

Workmen poured into Horace Hawkins's Select Dining-Rooms, fighting for places near the window so that they could enjoy the spectacle of the fire-brigade at work as they ate scouse and hot-pot such as has never been surpassed. Standing in the street, surrounded by sympathetic cronies, Percy Lovestick wept as he saw the hoses pouring their jets into his establishment.

" Pore feller," said Horace, trying to balance four plates of scouse. " 'E said 'e'd burn my place down, an' 'e's burnt 'is own."

" Evil to 'im as evil thinks," said Spadger sagely.

★ ★ ★

GILT-EDGED STORK?

Protect the birds. The dove brings peace, and the stork brings tax exemption.

Birmingham News

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IN NEXT MONTH'S

ARGOSY

DAVID WALKER, author of "Geordie," breaks new ground with an intriguing story of love in a very cold climate. In the Arctic regions today, radar and aviation have brought a new way of life to the Eskimoes, but true love goes right on in its old and unsmooth course

KEM BENNETT makes a light-hearted excursion into Big Business and shows there's no holding a young man who swallows the right pep pill

WALTER MACKEN tells a charming story of a small boy who befriends Samson, a meek old circus lion

MICHAEL GILBERT a brand-new Petrella adventure

IN ARGOSY ON SALE JANUARY 10

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McCreary's Luck

BY MICHAEL EAST

WHEN he woke, it was mid afternoon.

The first thing he saw was the old-fashioned fan turning slowly and uselessly in the heavy air. It made no draught, only a sleepy drone as if the spindle was worn and needed oiling. Then he saw the sunlight seeping through the slats of the rattan blinds.

Then he remembered.

He was in a hotel—the Tanjil Hotel in Jakarta. He had flown in from Pakanbaroe in Sumatra. The fever had hit him an hour after his arrival; a wrenching, shivering agony ending in darkness. His name was Mike McCreary. He was an oil man out of a job.

He threw back the sheets and slid off the bed, steadying himself against the table until the first giddiness had passed. He walked slowly across the polished floor to the bathroom. From the shaving-mirror, a gaunt yellow face stared back at him. An Irish face, with bright, shrewd eyes sunk deep in their dark sockets, an inquisitive nose, and a wide, thin mouth that grinned engagingly when he was happy, and closed like a trap when the black mood was on him—as it was now. For McCreary was on the beach—flat broke and busted—a long, long way from Kerry of the Kings.

He shaved unsteadily but carefully, then turned on the shower and stood under the jets, lathering and sluicing, until the fever-reek was gone from his skin and he felt fresh again. He walked back into the bedroom and stood towelling himself, naked under the reluctant, droning fan. No sooner was he dry than the dank heat made him sweat again. He gave it up and began to dress.

There was a knock at the door, and Captain Raka stepped into the room. He was a small, compact Javanese with an oblique smile and a soft voice, dressed in a grey tropic suit of military cut, with a black fez cocked at a slight angle.

He bowed stiffly. "Good afternoon, Mr. McCreary."

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McCreary said, " Good afternoon," and went on knotting his tie. Captain Raka took out a cigarette, tapped it on his thumbnail, and lit it. He grinned at McCreary through the smoke. " How do you feel now? " McCreary shrugged.

" You are feeling weak? "

" How else? " Captain Raka smiled and clicked his tongue.

" You will be better tomorrow."

" I hope so," said McCreary, without conviction.

" I shall call for you at midday and escort you to the airport."

McCreary slewed round and faced him squarely. " You're in a hurry to get rid of me, aren't you? "

" The extradition order has been in force for some days," said Raka smoothly. " I am charged to execute it as soon as possible." He looked down at the backs of his small brown hands. " Meantime, I should prefer you did not leave the hotel. It is unwise to move about the city when papers are not in order."

" I'm sure it is," said McCreary.

" Midday tomorrow then? "

" I'll be waiting for you."

Raka bowed again and went out, walking lightly like a dancer on the balls of his toes. McCreary waited until the door closed on him, then he cursed, fluently and foully. Raka was a policeman, the representative of law and order, but the law worked strangely and deviously in this sprawling, gimcrack republic. It worked

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better if you oiled the wheels a little. But McCreary's sole possessions were a plane ticket to Singapore, a month's salary in Indonesian rupiahs—and the luck of the Irish.

He put on his coat, walked down to the lounge, and ordered a gin-sling and a copy of the Straits Times. He thought it was time he started to look for a job.

Even before he opened the paper he knew he was wasting his time. He was an oil man, not a clerk. He was a driller and his place was here, in the Islands, but oil was a tricky business—political business. The big companies depended for their concessions on the favour of foreign governments and the expensive goodwill of local officials.

He gave up reading: the print danced in front of his eyes.

Then a voice spoke to him—an English voice, high and thin like the squeak of a bat. "Are you McCreary?"

He looked up, startled, and saw a squat, stocky man in a tussore suit. His hair was black, his eyes were grey-green. His nose was a predatory beak and his mouth was small and red as a woman's above the square chin. His face was dead-white, except where the razor stubble showed on his jaw-line. His hands were short and stubby and covered with thick black hair. It was hard to match him with the thin, reedy voice.

McCreary looked at him a moment before he answered. "I'm McCreary. Who are you?"

"Rubensohn. Mind if I sit down?" He sat down, laid his thick hands, palms down, on the table, pushed himself back in his chair, and smiled at McCreary. "I hear you're in trouble, my friend."

"You do, now?" asked McCreary mildly. "What did you hear, and where?"

"You were drilling with Palmex in Pakanbaroe. You beat up a Sundanese boy, who then reported you to the police. The Company disclaimed all responsibility and the police took out a warrant for your extradition. You have been sick for three days. You are to leave Jakarta tomorrow. Is that right?"

"If it's any business of yours," said McCreary in his soft Kerry brogue, "he wrecked a new bit and thirty feet of casing, through sheer bloody carelessness. He set our operations back more than a month. I'd warned him a dozen times before. This time I hit him."

"An expensive indulgence."

"So, it's my expense. Why should you worry?"

"I don't worry, Mr. McCreary. I'm interested."

"Why?"

"I'd like to offer you a job."

McCreary stared at him blankly.

"Are you interested?"

"Sure I'm interested. But what sort of a job? Where?"

"Let's have a drink, shall we?" said Rubensohn in his high, piping voice. He clapped his hands; a Malay boy in a coxcomb

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head-dress and a batik sarong hurried over to take the order. While they waited, McCreary smoked a cigarette, and Rubensohn watched him with ironic amusement.

Abruptly he asked, "How old are you, McCreary?"

"Thirty-eight."

"Married?"

"No."

"Any vices?"

"The usual ones."

"And an uncertain temper?"

"I don't get on with fools. I don't like careless work."

Rubensohn nodded agreement. "Put that on the credit side. What's your ambition?"

McCreary grinned at him. "Now that's the damndest question I've ever had put to me. I doubt you'd understand it if I told you."

"Try me."

McCreary's eyes clouded. With a sudden gesture, he stubbed out his cigarette, and leaned across the table. "I don't know who you are, Rubensohn, or what you want, and I don't much care whether you'll like the answer I give. But here it is. I'm a damn-fool Irishman with itchy feet and his home on his back. My only talent is plugging holes in the ground to get oil. My only ambition is to make enough money to buy me a nice little stud-farm twenty miles from Dublin, and see if I can breed the winner of the Grand National. Now, if you want to laugh, go ahead!"

"I'm not laughing," said Rubensohn. "So you're interested in money?"

McCreary shrugged and said, "Who isn't?"

Then the boy came back with the drinks. Rubensohn raised his glass, "Good luck, McCreary!"

"Slainte!"

Rubensohn sipped his drink and wiped his red lips. He said, deliberately, "Money is the least important thing in the world."

"When you have it," said McCreary flatly.

"Exactly. When you have it, you know what it really is—a bundle of soiled paper, a handful of base metal, a grubby token of something far more important, credit. Myself, for instance," he tapped his barrel-chest, "I never carry more money than is necessary for the expenses of the moment. Yet I have credit everywhere—Hong Kong, Jakarta, New York, Paris, London. With that credit, I can do business all over the world. I can make fifty thousand pounds by lifting a telephone. I can speculate on rubber in Singapore and pepper in the Celebes. I can send Palmex shares down three points in an afternoon. And I can send your shares rocketing in the same way."

"I don't own any shares," said McCreary.

"You could," said Rubensohn in his reedy incongruous voice, "if you accept the job."

"What is it?"

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Rubensohn smiled and shook his head. "Not here, McCreary. People talk. Other people listen. The best business is private. Look, you are, on your own showing, a man with itchy feet, who carries his home on his back. I offer you three thousand American dollars to make a trip with me to look at the job. If you don't like it, you pull out with a profit. If you want it, you keep your money and make more—lots more. What do you say?"

"Where do we go?"

"A long way from here. Out to the Celebes."

"That's still part of the Indonesian Republic. I'm under an extradition order. The police have impounded my passport. I can't get it back till I'm on the plane tomorrow."

Rubensohn smiled gently and fished in his breast pocket. He took out a small book with the symbol of the Republic of Eire on the cover and laid it on the table between them.

McCreary goggled at it. "That's my passport! How the hell did you—?"

Rubensohn waved a deprecating hand. "Credit, my dear fellow! It is useful at all levels. Captain Raka understands that. He is much less interested in you than in a sudden increase in his bank account. He is prepared to agree to another form of transport for you—and not ask too many questions about your destination. If you agree, you will sail with me on the midnight tide."

McCreary stared at him with puzzled, brooding eyes. He shook his head. "I don't get it, Rubensohn. I don't understand a single word of it. You're a business man. You want profit. You don't give charity. Why me? I'm a driller, out of a job. How can you hope to make a profit on me?"

"At this moment," said Rubensohn slowly, "I need a man to handle certain business for me in the eastern part of the Republic. I need him urgently. I had a man lined up in Singapore. Now he can't come. You are available and I am prepared to gamble on you. The only question is, are you prepared to gamble on me?"

"For three thousand American dollars?"

"And the prospect of much more."

McCreary looked at him a moment, then his lean face broke into a lopsided grin. "One of us is a damn fool, Rubensohn. I've got the feeling it's me."

"Why not call it the luck of the Irish?"

McCreary shrugged and held out his hand. "Why not, indeed? All right, Rubensohn, you've got yourself a man."

Rubensohn's handclasp was slack and flabby, but his grey-green eyes were sharp with interest. He said curtly, "Good. We'll call it settled. Now, let's go to my room and talk business."

They stood up. McCreary, moved by an odd Celtic quirk, looked at his watch. It was four-thirty. The date was the tenth of July. If there were omens in that, he had no wit to read them. He walked out of the room side by side with Rubensohn.

Rubensohn's room was a large, cool chamber furnished with

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carved teak. French windows opened onto a latticed balcony and the walls were hung with canvases by Javanese artists.

But the pictures were pale and lifeless beside the girl.

She was small, high-breasted, perfect as a wax doll. Her hair was jet-black. Her skin had the warm honey-colour of the metis—the exotic bloom that flowers out of the grafting of East and West. Her body was sheathed in a dress of jade-green brocade, high to the neck. There were jewels on her fingers, diamonds and a blood-red ruby. Her feet were bare in high-heeled openwork sandals made by a Chinese craftsman.

When they came in, she was preening herself at the mirror. She turned and looked at them curiously, but said nothing. McCreary grinned at her, but there was no flicker of interest in her dark eyes.

Rubensohn made a perfunctory introduction. "This is Lisette. Lisette—a new colleague, McCreary. He will be travelling with us."

"A pleasure, ma'am," said McCreary, with a flourish.

The girl said nothing. Rubensohn smiled thinly. McCreary felt faintly ridiculous.

Rubensohn jerked his thumb towards the french windows. "Outside, Lisette. Wait for us."

The girl shrugged and turned away from the mirror. She walked to the french windows and opened them. McCreary saw a chaise-longue set under the trailing greenery of the lattice. The girl went out, closing the door behind her.

"She's beautiful," said McCreary.

"She's mine," said Rubensohn, without emphasis. "I like decorative women."

"You're lucky to be able to afford 'em."

Rubensohn shrugged indifferently, unlocked a drawer, and took out a long tube of transparent paper, which he spread carefully on the table.

"Take a look at this, McCreary." McCreary bent over the drawing. He whistled soundlessly.

It was a survey chart made by a famous American company of geological surveyors. The signature on this oil survey was that of their best man. Both were familiar to McCreary. Rubensohn watched him shrewdly.

"What does it tell you?"

"If it's genuine . . ."

"It's genuine. It cost me twenty thousand dollars."

"Cheap at the price," said McCreary. "I smell oil. Lots of it."

Rubensohn's stubby finger thrust at a point on the map.

"How long would it take you to bring in a well there?"

"Hold it a minute, Rubensohn!" McCreary straightened up and faced him. "Let's get a few things clear. A survey's one thing. To bring in a well is something else entirely."

"How so?"

"A surveyor," said McCreary easily, "is a man, not a mole. He lives on top of the ground. He can't see underneath it. He

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can't tell you whether the oil's there or not. That's a gamble—a financier's gamble, a driller's gamble."

Rubensohn nodded. The answer seemed to please him. He put another question. "Suppose there is oil on the anticline. At the depth shown on this survey, how long would you take to bring it in?"

McCreary considered the question. "What's your equipment like?"

"The best."

"I'd say anything from a week to a fortnight to get the rigs up and spud in. Then another month. Give us six weeks in all and we should have the answer for you."

"Good!" The word came out as a long exhalation of relief.

McCreary looked at him sharply. "Understand me, Rubensohn! I can't make promises. I can't provide against human error and acts of God."

"I don't expect you to. What sort of labour force do you need?"

"An engineer first—a man who can keep my plant in order. The rest I can handle with local labour, provided I have a free hand."

"I've got an engineer. Where we are going you'll have the labour—and the free hand."

"Where are we going?"

Rubensohn smiled and shook his head. "Sealed orders, McCreary, until we're three days clear of Jakarta."

McCreary made a small gesture of indifference.

Rubensohn rolled up the chart, and put it back. He turned to McCreary. His eyes were bright with satisfaction and his red mouth was smiling blandly. "I like you, McCreary. I think we should go a long way together."

McCreary thrust his hands into his pockets and leaned back against the table. He said softly, "Before we go anywhere, Rubensohn, I'd like to know how much I'm getting paid, apart from the retainer."

Without a moment's hesitation, Rubensohn laid down the terms. "Three thousand dollars' retainer, three hundred a week during the drilling period, a bonus of ten thousand if you bring me in a well, or the equivalent in shares in any company we form. All expenses paid during your employment, and a free passage to any port in the world at the end of it. Unless, of course, you decide you'd like to continue working for me. How does that sound?"

"Fine," said McCreary coolly.

"Do you want it in writing?" McCreary shook his head.

Rubensohn looked at him oddly and frowned. "Never take any man's word about money, McCreary."

"If you want to write me a contract, do it by all means. The girl can witness it."

"I'd prefer it that way," said Rubensohn evenly. "Call her in, McCreary, and have her fix us a drink. And, McCreary—" Halfway to the french windows McCreary turned back. Rubensohn

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was smiling at him but his eyes were hard as pebbles—" Lisette is mine. Remember that, won't you? "

" With all that money," said McCreary gently, " why should you worry? "

He threw open the casements and stood looking down at the girl. She was like a bird, he thought—a bright gold-green bird under the trailing vines.

At eight o'clock the same evening, McCreary packed his canvas holdall, paid his bill at the desk, and walked out into the warm darkness. He put down his bag and stood for a moment against the bole of a big banyan tree to light a cigarette. Before he had doused the flame of his lighter, three betjaks pedalled up to him ringing their bells furiously. Their drivers leapt out and began tugging at his sleeves, crying in parrot-like Malay the speed and cleanliness of their vehicles. McCreary grinned and shoved them away and hefted his bag onto the seat of the first arrival. The driver laughed and mocked his rivals with a dirty word and a dirtier gesture and the next minute they were racing away towards the harbour, with plumes tossing and bells ringing and the air humming in the rubber bands stretched under the seat.

From the quay, he read the name on her bows, *Corsair, Panama.* He paid off the betjak, picked up his bag, and walked swiftly towards the ship. A Malay Serang waved him up the gangway and when he reached the top, a young deck-officer saluted him smartly and inquired his business in passable English.

" I'm McCreary."

" You are expected, sir. I understand you sail with us. Arturo Caracciolo, second officer. This way, sir."

" Happy to know you, Arturo. Where's Mr. Rubensohn? "

" In the saloon, sir. He is waiting dinner for you."

Arturo threw open the door of a cabin and stood aside to let him enter. McCreary whistled with surprise. The cabin was as large as a state-room. There was a bed and a writing-desk and an easy chair clamped to the floor. There were bright Italian water-colours on the wall and modern drapes on the bed and at the portholes.

Arturo smiled with boyish satisfaction. " She was built in England, sir, and converted in Genoa. We are very proud of her."

McCreary asked, innocently, " Who is *we*? "

" The personnel, sir. Dutch Captain. Italian Officers."

" And the crew? "

" Malay deck-hands. Lascars in the engine-room. Chinese in the galley." McCreary nodded. He thought Rubensohn was a shrewd fellow with an eye to detail. Divide and rule. There was small room for trouble with a crew like that.

Arturo led him to the saloon and announced him with a flourish, " Captain Janzoon, Mr. Rubensohn—Mr. McCreary."

They stood to welcome him: Janzoon, a blond giant of a man with a cropped skull and a spade beard, Rubensohn . . . and the girl. Rubensohn greeted him with studied warmth. The girl gave

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him a distant nod. Captain Janzoon crushed his hand in a fist as big as a ham.

Rubensohn's thin voice cut across, "A drink for McCreary, Captain." Janzoon poured two fingers of whisky into a glass and handed it to McCreary, who tempered it carefully with water and toasted them. Janzoon and Rubensohn drank with him. The girl smoked a brown cigarette in a long holder with a gold mouthpiece and a jade tip.

Rubensohn put down his glass and said brusquely, "The four of us here are the only persons concerned in this enterprise, McCreary. The rest are employed to run the ship and mind their own business. Is that clear?"

"Clear as me own conscience," said McCreary.

For the first time a flicker of interest showed in Lisette's dark eyes.

Rubensohn looked at his watch and said briskly, "Dinner in fifteen minutes, gentlemen. Excuse us. Come, Lisette!" He turned away and walked out of the saloon. The girl followed him without a word; without a glance at McCreary or Janzoon.

They watched her go, with speculative eyes. If there was coquetry in her walk, they did not see it. She was beautiful and cold as a wax doll. McCreary and Janzoon looked at each other. McCreary grinned and Janzoon gave his throaty chuckle.

"What do you think of her, eh, McCreary?"

"I mustn't," said McCreary. "The stewards have warned me off the course."

Janzoon gave him a quick, shrewd glance from under his bushy brows. "Wise fellow. We should get to know each other, you and I. I think we could be good friends." Janzoon splashed more whisky into their glasses. He handed the drink to McCreary and asked casually, "Have you known Rubensohn long?"

"Four or five hours. Why?"

"He's a big man," said Janzoon deliberately. "He knows what he wants and goes after it. He has great wealth. His name opens doors in Rome and Paris and Geneva and New York. This ship—he bought her from the wreckers for thirty thousand pounds and spent another fifty thousand to make her what she is today. He thinks big. He does not stint money on a project. He pays well for good service."

"What's his real business?" asked McCreary cautiously.

Janzoon shrugged. "A man like that is interested in anything that makes profit anywhere in the world. Today it is oil. Tomorrow it may be guns or gold or cotton. He plays the market. He floats a new company here, buys an old one there. He has the golden touch."

"Have you been with him long?"

"Ever since the *Corsair* was commissioned, three years ago. This is the best berth I've ever had. Good pay and better pickings." McCreary eyed him quizzically.

"Some of the gold rubs off, eh?"

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" Sometimes."

" It's a promising thought."

" For the right man," said Janzoon softly, " more than promising. A certainty." McCreary grinned and buried his nose in his drink.

Janzoon said warningly, " A thing to remember, my friend. Mr. Rubensohn doesn't appreciate jokes—especially jokes he doesn't understand."

" Then I'm sorry for the fellow," said McCreary. " It's a sad life that has no laughter in it."

" A better life than yours or mine," said Janzoon sourly. " With money and a woman like that, and the power to break a dozen men in as many minutes.

" Take a word of advice, McCreary. Never cross Rubensohn in front of his woman. He's a big man, sure, but he has to feel big all the time. Watch him any time where there is company. He must have the spotlight, the centre of the stage." He glanced at his watch. " Rubensohn likes punctuality, too. We'd better go down to dinner. We dine in his suite, with the beautiful Lisette."

" Who is she? " The question was out before he knew it and Janzoon gave him a swift, sidelong glance that belied his indifferent answer.

" Lisette? A metis from Saigon, by her skin and her accent. But whether she comes from the palace or the gutter, who knows? What she is now, Rubensohn has made her. She is his product and his property."

" So he told me," said McCreary softly. " I wonder if the girl thinks the same way."

Janzoon stopped dead in his tracks. He caught McCreary's arm and swung him round hard against the steel bulkhead. His spade beard thrust forward into McCreary's face. His voice was an angry whisper.

" Listen to me, Irishman! There are ten million beautiful women from Jakarta to Dili. All of them you can have with my blessing. But this one, you don't touch. She belongs to the big man. She keeps him happy. So long as he's happy, we all stay comfortable and get rich. Make so much as a smile at her, and you have two knives at your throat—his and mine! Understand? "

McCreary's smile was as bland as a babe's, his brogue as soft as butter. " Sure, I understand. But why should I give a tinker's damn for a cold one like that? I'm a warm-hearted fellow myself and I like a smile and maybe a gentle word or two at bedtime."

" So long as you understand," grunted Janzoon sourly, and slackened his grip on McCreary's arm.

McCreary faced him squarely. His mouth was still puckered in that lopsided grin, but his eyes were bright with anger. He said bleakly, " A word in your own ear, Captain. Keep your hands in your pockets in future. The next time you touch me I'll break your bloody neck! "

Janzoon's mouth dropped open with the shock; then without

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a word he turned on his heel and led the way to Rubensohn's state-room.

When they entered, they saw Lisette sitting languidly. Her small, perfect body was sheathed in silver lamé and her ornaments were of jade and emerald. She was smoking a cigarette and flipping idly through the pages of a French fashion magazine. She looked up when they entered, murmured a greeting, and then turned back to her reading.

McCreary remembered the warnings he had been given and turned his attention to Rubensohn.

He was dressed as meticulously as if it were the Captain's Dinner on the Pacific run, yet the first impression was of a squat frog compressed into the trappings of a gentleman. His face was whiter still now that it had been shaved and pomaded, and the small mouth was cherry-red under the jutting nose.

He greeted them briskly.

" Sit down, gentlemen. We have a few minutes before our next guest arrives. I have things to say to you before he comes."

Janzoon looked up in surprise. It was clear that he, at least, was expecting no more visitors before sailing-time.

Rubensohn smiled grimly, then he said, " Our next guest is a friend of Mr. McCreary."

" The devil he is! What's his name? "

" Captain Raka."

McCreary almost leapt from his chair. " It's your ship, of course," he said bluntly. " If it was mine, I'd not have that little bastard within a mile of it. I'd pay him his money in a dark corner and give him a kick in the teeth for good measure."

" Now we get down to business," said Rubensohn. " Captain Raka comes to be paid. Unfortunately . . ." he looked down at the backs of his short, hairy hands, " unfortunately, he now demands more money than we agreed. More money than I am prepared to pay. So I must talk to him privately. We will make a leisurely meal. Then, after the coffee, you, Captain, will have your own business on the bridge. You, McCreary, will take Lisette and entertain her a little in the saloon on the deck. When I have finished my business with Captain Raka, I shall send for you. Is that clear? "

" It sounds like a pleasant evening," said McCreary.

" Let's hope so, for your sake," said Rubensohn drily.

McCreary looked up sharply. " And what does that mean? "

Rubensohn shrugged and smiled humourlessly.

" Unless I can come to terms with Captain Raka, you, McCreary, are on the beach again."

" Would you like me to throw him in the harbour for you? " asked McCreary, with grim irony.

" Later, perhaps. For the present, you will look after Lisette and leave Captain Raka to me."

" As I said, it'll be a pleasure! "

He turned and made an ironic sweeping bow to Lisette. But

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she did not lift her head to look at him. She was still flipping over the big, shiny pages where all the women had faces like her own . . . cold and beautiful and dead.

Five minutes later Captain Raka came in and they sat down to dinner. It was an uneasy meal. The little Javanese was cagey and suspicious, parrying the simplest questions with a sidelong smile and click of his tongue.

Janzoon was clearly unhappy. Lisette made no contribution at all to the conversation, and McCreary's Irish blood tempted him to bait the little policeman, who sat there grinning and clucking his contempt of the Westerners.

Only Rubensohn was completely master of himself and of the situation. He led them through the courtesies of the meal. His thin, reedy voice flattered and cajoled, so that, out of the hostility and conflict, there came a kind of harmony, illusory and temporary, but enough to last them to the coffee and the first glass of brandy.

Then, without emphasis, Rubensohn dismissed them. "If you will excuse us awhile, Lisette, gentlemen . . . Captain Raka and I have business to discuss."

Janzoon left them without a word, and McCreary and the girl walked up the companionway to the after deck. The air was warm and heavy with the smell of the city and the jungle, but Lisette shivered when McCreary linked his arm in hers. As he led her over to the railing, her sandals made a small, dry clatter on the steel plates of the deck.

They stood together, leaning over the rail and watching the play of lights on the slack, oily water. McCreary was aware of the skin of her arm, silken under his touch, but there was no pulse to it, no answer to the tentative pressure of his fingers.

Her voice had the upward, questioning lilt of the metis, but there was no life there either. It was like the tinkle of the little glass bells that fluttered outside the shrines of the old gods. McCreary wondered how it would sound when she laughed and how long it was since she had been touched to passion or to tears. He asked her in the soft honeyed brogue of the Kerryman, "We're to be together for a long time, it seems. Could you not give me a smile sometimes and a word to pass the hour of day?"

"Why should it matter to you whether I smile?"

"It'd make me feel better," said McCreary lightly. "More of a man, maybe, and less of a footloose gypsy with no hearth to warm his toes at and no wife to warm his bed."

"I'm paid to do that for one man now. Two would be too much." She said it simply, inconsequently, staring out across the water.

"There's no question of payment," said McCreary, with a grin. "I'm as poor as a village fiddler. So what I get I must get for love, and what I give is out of a full heart and an empty pocket. I'm out of the market. Is that any reason why you shouldn't give me the pleasure of a smile or two? Is the world such a sad place that you can't find a damn thing to laugh about? Look now . . ." He

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pointed out across the bay to where the tugs were hauling a big white Italian, snout first, into the channel. "There's a sight for you. You know where she's going? Singapore first and then Colombo and afterwards Naples."

"I've been to Naples." Her voice was empty of interest.

"You have, now? And you stayed no doubt in a fine hotel down on the waterfront in the best suite that Rubensohn's money could buy. And you had every damn waiter in the place tripping over himself to give you service, and every damn huckster trying to sell you something."

"I did."

"Where else have you been, now?"

She shrugged lightly and counted off the names, "Oh, many places—New York, London, Paris, Cannes."

"And every one of them was like the other, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Then don't you see, dark one, you haven't lived an hour or a moment of it. You don't know what the world's about, or what the taste of happiness feels like."

"Happiness?" She lingered on the word almost with scorn. "Happiness, no . . . that I do not know. But the world? I know it better than you, McCreary, much, much better."

"And how would you make that out, dark one? When I've wandered the world since I was sixteen years of age?"

"I didn't have to wander. The world came to me."

"Why shouldn't it? And you with all that dark and secret beauty."

She did not bridle at the compliment as another woman might have done. Her hand lay slack and unresponsive in his own. She said simply, "In the Peacock Pavilion there were no secrets. All the doors opened to a man who had money."

"Where was this?" McCreary's voice came dry and harsh.

"Saigon."

"Is that where Rubensohn found you?"

"Yes. I had the talent to please him, it seemed—and he is a difficult man to please. More than that, it gives him satisfaction to present me to respectable people, to have men bow over my hand and women admire my clothes and my jewels, and to know all the time that I am a woman he has picked out of the gutter."

"And you?"

"Me?" He heard in her voice the brittle music of the old and ugly gods. "I am content. Why should I be otherwise? There are two hundred women in the Peacock Pavilion. Here I am the only one. And better paid than any of the others."

"Until Rubensohn gets tired of you."

"Could you do better for me, McCreary?" There was no anger in her voice, only a thin, cool irony.

"I might," said McCreary soberly, "if the passion took me and took you at the same time and we could go far away to make a new beginning."

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Then, for the first time, he heard her laugh. But there was no joy in it for him or her. "You're a fool, McCreary."

"That's something I've known a long time. But I like my folly better than Rubensohn's wisdom."

"Why did you join him then?"

"Because he offered me good money to do the only job I'm trained for—drill for oil."

"You were afraid of Captain Raka."

Now it was McCreary's turn to laugh—a gusty bellow that rang out across the harbour. Lisette drew away from him, startled.

"Afraid of him? Why should I be afraid of a teak-faced jack in office like that? The most he could do was to put me on the plane to Singapore. Then Rubensohn came along and made me an offer and told me he'd squared Raka to allow me to be extradited on the *Corsair*. It wasn't even illegal, though I don't doubt Raka made it sound a big concession and charged him plenty for it."

"Then why has Raka come here tonight, if not for you?"

"Whatever the reason, my dark one, he didn't come here for me."

"Why, then?" There was an odd note in her voice that puzzled him, but her eyes were blank as a doll's and her face as beautiful.

He leaned back against the rail and laughed at her. "Should you care why? Should I? It's Rubensohn's business and Rubensohn's money. So long as we are paid, who cares? One thing you can be sure of, Raka's doing better than either of us—except me!"

Then he took her in his arms and kissed her and Lisette beat at his breast with small helpless hands, but he held her until the coldness melted out of her and her lips were warm to his own . . .

A long time later, it seemed, they sat together on the canvas hatch-cover, McCreary smoking peacefully and Lisette repairing the damage to her lips and hair.

McCreary said softly, "So now we know."

Her face was in shadow, so that he could not see whether she smiled or frowned, but when she answered, her voice was no longer brittle but low and strained.

"So we know—what? That you are a man who warms quickly to a woman?"

"And you a woman who can warm to me?"

"That too. But where does it lead us?"

"Wherever you want," said McCreary soberly. "Over the side and down the gangplank and back to the city. We can start from there."

She shook her head. "And you with a police order against you and no money in your pocket?"

His hand reached out to her in the darkness but she drew back. He challenged her, brutally.

"So we stay here. Me wanting you. You wanting me. Me trying to keep my hands and my eyes off you, night and day . . . and you in another man's bed, because he's got more money than I have. Is that what you want?"

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"It's not what I want, McCreary. It's what I have. I intend to keep it until someone offers me better."

"Isn't love better? Even with the risks of it?"

"Love?" The word was a tinkling mockery. "You call this love? You think you are the only man for whom I have had this feeling? You think I believe I am the only woman who has moved you? Be honest, McCreary, as I am with you."

"So Rubensohn does own you after all."

"He owns what he has paid for, nothing more. Look, McCreary—" Her voice warmed suddenly and she laid her small hand on his. "In another time, in another place, there might have been hope for us. But not here, not with him. Don't you see? If he knew what has passed between us just now he would do everything in his power to hurt and humiliate us, to destroy us even. You don't know him as I do. He stops at nothing to get what he wants."

"I'm a determined man myself," said McCreary lightly.

"You're a bigger fool than you know, McCreary," she said sombrely. And before he had time to deny it, a Chinese steward came padding round the deck to tell them that Rubensohn was ready for them.

The first thing they saw when they entered Rubensohn's suite was Captain Raka slumped across the table, snoring noisily. There was a champagne bucket at his elbow and an overturned glass in front of him. A runnel of spilt liquor dripped from the table onto his lap. Rubensohn himself was standing over by the porthole smoking one of his fat cigars.

Lisette stared at Raka in amazement. McCreary swore softly, "Mother of God! Drunk as a fiddler!"

Rubensohn smiled and waved his cigar expansively. "A good Moslem never touches hard liquor. Raka forgot his faith, and this is the result."

"Did you finish your business with him?" asked McCreary.

"Oh yes. Satisfaction on both sides."

"It didn't take him long to get like this."

Rubensohn looked at him sharply, but McCreary's eyes were innocent of malice.

"Now he presents us with another problem," said Rubensohn flatly, "how to get him home."

"Simple enough," said McCreary airily. "Call a betjak, bundle him into it, and tell the boy to take him to police headquarters."

"Not so simple as it looks, McCreary." Rubensohn gestured impatiently. "He was here, unknown to his superiors, for the purpose of negotiating a bribe. If we call a betjak to the ship, the driver will know where he came from. He will be questioned and so shall we, and we are due to sail an hour from now."

"He's in no condition to walk home," grinned McCreary.

"No, but he can be walked away from the ship, down to the market area. Then he can be bundled into a cab and sent on. I suggest you hoist him up and get him out of here at once."

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McCreary was instantly hostile. "Why me? Why not one of your deck-hands, one of the lascars?"

Rubensohn smiled at him blandly. "Because, at this moment, they are all busy preparing to put to sea. Because you, McCreary, are in my debt and I ask this as a small favour." He chuckled and went on in his high bird's voice, "And because now, at last, you have your chance to throw him in the harbour if you want to."

McCreary looked at him a moment, debating the question. Then he said coolly, "The only reason that holds water, Rubensohn, is that I owe you something. For that, I'll do it."

He bent over the snoring Captain Raka and slung one arm around his shoulder, then heaved him out of the chair by main force. Raka's full weight hung on him like a coal sack.

"Put his fez on, Rubensohn, and steady him while I get my grip. I'll need a lift up the companionway."

Rubensohn clapped the black fez on Raka's lolling head and McCreary half walked, half dragged him to the door like an old friend roistering home from a party.

Lisette watched him stagger down the passageway and up the companion ladder, while Rubensohn heaved and grunted to get the pair of them safely on deck.

"Get him well away from the waterfront," said Rubensohn tersely. "If he's too much trouble, toss him in the canal."

"I've been drunk myself," said Mike McCreary, "I couldn't do that to my worst enemy. Come on, Raka me boyo, see if you can't walk a little and take the weight off my shoulders."

And, whistling a tuneless little jig, he staggered down the gangplank to the quay, while Captain Raka breathed thickly and noisily down his collar.

At first he tried to make Raka walk with him, but the little man's legs dangled slack as a puppet's and his polished shoes scuffed in the dust as McCreary dragged him into the shadows of the loading-ramps between the warehouses. More than once he had to stop and lean against a wooden wall or a concrete pylon to take breath and ease the weight on his shoulder. All the time his eyes and ears were alert for the coming of the dock police and he wondered what answer he would give if they questioned him.

Finally, he cleared the warehouses and found himself on a narrow path fringed with jungle growth, at the end of which he could see the shape of a bamboo bridge and the gleam of canal water and a huddle of yellow lights. To judge from the distant clatter of voices and the yapping of dogs, the night market was in full swing.

He decided it would be safe to give up all pretence of walking the Captain and hoist him over his shoulder—easier, too, than dragging a dead weight as he had done for the last fifteen minutes.

In the shelter of a big banyan tree, he halted and let the little Captain slide to the ground. He stood a moment to take breath and flex his muscles and loosen his tie. He realized that his clothes were sodden with sweat and clung to his body. Then he realized something else.

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Raka wasn't snoring any more. He wasn't breathing either.

He knelt swiftly and laid his ear to the little man's chest. He could hear no heartbeat. He felt for his pulse. There was none. The hands were cold, though the air was hot and reeking. McCreary fumbled for his lighter, snapped on the flame, and held it close to Raka's face. The eyes were open and staring. The mouth was slack and a small runnel of spittle had dried against the jaw.

By all elementary tests, Captain Raka was dead.

Swiftly McCreary went through his pockets. In the breast pocket there was a wallet. In the fob of his trousers a handful of small notes. There was a handkerchief and a packet of American cigarettes and a cheap Japanese lighter. McCreary opened the wallet and went through it quickly. Letters, a police card, a photograph of a woman and a child, five hundred rupiahs in notes—nothing more. He wiped the wallet with his handkerchief and put it carefully back in the breast pocket. Acting on a sudden impulse, he shoved the lighter and the cigarettes into his own pocket.

Then he lifted Raka's body by the armpits and dragged it behind the bole of the banyan tree. The fez rolled off in the process. He picked it up, dusted it carefully, and cocked it over the staring eyes. He wiped his hands on his own handkerchief, stepped out on the path, and walked swiftly back the way he had come.

When he reached the shelter of the warehouses, he stopped, propped himself in a sheltered angle, and lit a cigarette. A dead man's cigarette with a dead man's lighter. His hands were trembling and the small yellow flame wavered in front of him. The sweat on his body felt suddenly cold, as if the fever was coming on again. He leaned back against the slats of the wall, inhaled deeply, and battled to set his thoughts in order.

Think about it, McCreary. Think! Think! A man's dead. He died in your arms. Raka's dead, but a man doesn't die of half a bottle of champagne. That's one lie chalked up to Mister goddam Rubensohn. And here's another. Raka came to be paid off. According to Rubensohn, he was paid off. But all he had in his pockets was spending-money—not enough to pay for fixing an extradition order, not enough to pay for whatever other services Rubensohn has had from him. Other services? But what? Big enough to make Raka think of raising his price. Rubensohn was in oil. Oil was a tricky business. You needed friends in Government quarters.

A policeman didn't have friends. But he did have power in a gimcrack republic like this one, where squeeze and graft were the order of the day. So he had raised his price. And Rubensohn had killed him. Poisoned his drink, or simply crammed the stuff down his neck at gun-point, because it's easier for a man to die unconscious than to feel a bullet tearing into his guts. The rest is crude stage management; slop champagne over his chin and down his shirt-front and keep talking till a thick-headed Irishman like McCreary takes him off your hands. If there's any trouble, McCreary's the man. He killed him to get his passport back. He's

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got a charge of violence against him from Pakanbaroe. If there's no trouble, you've got McCreary, too—to bring your well in and hand you a million on a silver plate. Clever fellow, Rubensohn. Clever, clever fellow. And like the lady said, McCreary, you're a bigger fool than you look.

The cigarette was smoked to a stub and the stub was scorching his fingers. He saw plainly the choice he must make.

He could cut loose from Rubensohn, here and now. Go back to town and take the two-o'clock plane to Singapore the following day. And hope the police didn't catch up with him in the meantime. But they probably would catch up with him—and when they did they'd shove him in gaol and work on him, in their aimless, pitiless Asiatic fashion, with rattan canes.

There was no profit in that. But there might be profit in Rubensohn. If he could command himself enough to put a grin on his face and a spring to his step, and walk back to the ship to tell Rubensohn that Raka was still snoring his way home. Rubensohn would believe him, because he would want to believe him. And then . . . ? He would do the job he was paid for. He would watch and manœuvre until one day he had Rubensohn where he wanted him, looking down the gun barrel and squealing for mercy. He would take Lisette and he would take his money and then he would remind him of Raka, and hand him the cheap little lighter for a souvenir . . .

When he reached the ship, he found Rubensohn pacing the deck, with a cigar stuck in his red woman's mouth and his hands clasped behind his back in the attitude of a pensive Napoleon.

McCreary fell into step beside him and Rubensohn questioned him, sharply. "You're back quicker than I expected. Did you have any trouble with Raka?"

"None at all." McCreary's tone was as casual as bedamned. "I pushed him into a betjak and paid the driver to cart him round till he sobered up. I told him he'd get a beating if he delivered him before he was respectable."

Rubensohn spluttered over his cigar and broke into his high laughter. "Magnificent, McCreary! Magnificent! By the time he wakes, we'll be heading out of the channel."

"I hope we'll be a long way farther than that," said McCreary. The irony was lost on Rubensohn.

The sky was a dazzle of blue; the sea, a flat mirror, broken only by the wash of their passing. Java was far south by now. To port lay a huddle of islands, blurred in the heat haze. They were thrusting eastward, dead on the sixth parallel, towards the Macassar Strait and the southern tip of the Celebes. The steady beat of the engines never faltered and their day was a bright but languid monotony. A canopy had been stretched on the after deck and a canvas swimming-bath slung beyond it.

McCreary and Lisette spent most of the first day stretched on towels under the canopy, stripped down to swimming-costumes;

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but Rubensohn sat in a deck-chair, immaculate in silk shirt and linen slacks, as if afraid or ashamed to expose his white, slug-like skin to the sun.

Since their brief interlude of the night before, they had had no moment of privacy or contact. When they swam together in the pool, Rubensohn's cold eyes followed them, and when they lay under the awning, Rubensohn dominated the talk, capping each incident with a tale of his own. The man's boorishness irritated McCreary, but he quickly learnt to control himself. He needed Rubensohn happy and unsuspicious. He needed Lisette, too, but he knew he would have to wait for time and secrecy.

Meantime, he set himself to open diplomatic relations with the Italian officers: young Arturo; Agnello, the horse-faced Florentine who ran the engines; Guido, the wireless officer, a stocky little Neapolitan, with flashing eyes and dark Arab face.

That afternoon, Janzoon had made a fumbling apology and taken him into his own cabin, poured him a double whisky-and-soda, and talked shrewdly and probingly about an alliance between them.

"I am a ship's captain. The time I have in port for private business is half that of an ordinary officer or seaman. With someone like you, free to move, to make the contacts, we could do big business, really big."

McCreary had grinned happily, poured himself another shot of the Captain's whisky, and promised to think it over. Then he walked slowly aft to join Rubensohn and Lisette under the awning.

To his surprise he found Lisette alone. She was sitting in a striped deck-chair leafing through a magazine. Her eyes were hidden from him by modish sun-glasses. He eased himself into the chair beside her and said quietly, "Where's Rubensohn?"

Without lifting her head from the magazine, she said flatly, "Gone to his cabin. The heat was too much for him. He said he would rest till dinner-time."

"Good. Then we can talk."

"Not for long. I'm going below, too."

"Listen, my dark one!" His voice was urgent and angry. "We've rehearsed this part, remember? I know the lines by heart. This is the next act—new scene, new time, new complications. You're in it, too, like it or not."

"I've told you before, McCreary, I'm not interested. I refuse to be involved. I've told you why."

"It's murder, sweetheart," said McCreary softly.

He might have told her the time of the day for all the reaction he got. Her small hands were steady on the glossy paper. She said calmly, "Whatever it is, it is not my business."

"Listen, Lisette! Last night . . ."

"Last night was a wild moment best forgotten."

"You told me I was a fool and . . ."

"And now you've found out?" Her voice was tinkling with mockery. "Then please don't make me part of your folly. Now, McCreary, will you go or must I?"

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"I'll go." He hoisted himself out of the chair and stood a moment looking down at her. His tone was harsh with disappointment and frustration. "You've had it rough, Lisette, and you're scared to lose the little you've salvaged. But you'll have it rougher yet, and you'll find that Rubensohn won't help at all, at all. He'll throw you to the sharks and watch them eat you. When that time comes, you'll remember what I'm telling you now. I want to help you. I can't unless you help me, too."

Then, for the first time, she took off her sun-glasses and he saw that her eyes were sombre and rebellious. She looked at him a long moment and shook her head slowly.

"Nobody can help you, McCreary. Nobody can help me either. We're both lost. The only difference between us is that I know it, and you don't. Now for God's sake, leave me in peace!"

He turned on his heel and left, cursing softly and fluently to himself. The magazine slipped from her hands, and she sat a long time numb and staring, while the warmth drained out of her golden body and the chill crept in around her frightened heart.

Guido, the wireless operator, was lounging in his chair waiting for the English bulletin from Singapore radio. When McCreary stuck his head into the cabin, he looked up and his swarthy face broke into a grin of welcome. "Come in, amico! Come in!"

Guido flicked the switch to take it on the speaker, and the voice of the news reader faded in, "A late message from our correspondent in Jakarta states that Indonesian police authorities are seeking to interview a former oil-company employee, Michael Aloysius McCreary, in connection with the murder of a senior official of the Jakarta police department. McCreary, who was due to be extradited for an act of violence in the Pakanbaroe area, has disappeared. A constant watch is being maintained on airport and dock areas in case McCreary tries to leave the country . . ."

Guido looked at McCreary with bright, shrewd eyes. He said, "That's you they talk about, eh?"

"That's me, Guido."

"Killed a policeman, eh? Big stuff!" Half of Naples is bandit at heart, and Guido's eyes widened with admiration. "What happened, amico? Did he steal your girl? Did he . . .?"

"I didn't kill him, Guido." McCreary slewed round sharply to face him. "Can I trust you to say nothing of this to anybody for two days?"

"Trust me? Senz' altro! I would swear it on the bones of my mother, if I knew who she was."

"I'll take your word for it, Guido," said McCreary, with a wry grin. "But I didn't kill him."

He stood up, and slammed one bunched fist into the palm of his other hand. He was in it now, for good and all. He'd been named to every police department in the east as the man behind the gun.

On the morning of the third day, Rubensohn called McCreary

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to his state-room. Captain Janzoon was there with Lisette, and Rubensohn was bending over a chart.

They looked up when he entered, a lean, gangling figure with his crooked grin and his shrewd eyes. Rubensohn greeted him warmly enough and pointed to the chart.

"The big day, McCreary. The day of revelations. Come here and look." Rubensohn's thick finger traced the last leg of their voyage. His voice was touched with a faint triumph.

"Here is where we are now. Sulawesi to the north. Soembawa far to the south. Ahead of us—this long island here—is Selajar, which is the gateway to the Banda Sea. Captain Janzoon tells me we shall clear the southern tip about midday today. From there—" His finger veered slightly northward and traced a line that bypassed the clutter of islands at the southern tip of Sulawesi and came to rest almost at the centre of the Banda Sea. He ringed the area with a pencil and McCreary saw that it was a small archipelago at the centre of which lay a largish island. He strained to read the tiny script, but Rubensohn had already given him the name— "We come to our destination, the island of Karang Sharo. Technically, the island is Indonesian territory. For all practical purposes, it is controlled by a hereditary Sultan, whose power is absolute in Karang Sharo and the surrounding islands."

"And this is where you had your survey made. How did you come to know there was oil there?"

Rubensohn answered without hesitation, "For that I am indebted to Captain Janzoon here. Janzoon brought it to my attention, and I made overtures to the Sultan, secured his permission for a survey, and later secured a concession, on very favourable terms, from the Government in Jakarta."

"That's the part that interests me," said McCreary mildly. "How did you swing it? I'm an oil man myself, remember, and I know how hard it is even for the big outfits to extend their concessions."

Rubensohn's red mouth twitched into an oblique smile and his eyes sharpened with interest. "A matter of influence, McCreary. Friends at court. You know."

"Sure," said McCreary softly. "It was a damn-fool question, anyway. What's the harbour like in this place?" Rubensohn was watching him now, guarded and suspicious. "I'm thinking of the future. Shore installations, storage tanks, harbourage for tankers. It's one thing to pump the stuff out of the ground. You've still got to get it to market. In a place like that—at the rear end of the world—it's a major development-project."

Rubensohn frowned and said tersely, "That's not your worry or mine. Our job is to bring in a well."

"Then you sell out as a going concern, eh?"

"Clever fellow," said Rubensohn softly. "Very clever, indeed. Looks as though we picked the right man, eh, Janzoon?"

Janzoon chuckled asthmatically and slapped a big fist on McCreary's shoulder. "First time I met him, I told you so,

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didn't I, Rubensohn? A good fellow, intelligent and far-sighted."

"I like to see where I'm going," said McCreary easily. "Who's the buyer, Rubensohn? Obviously you've got one, otherwise you wouldn't have gone to all this trouble."

Rubensohn wasn't smiling any more. His mouth was a thin line. His eyes were blank and filmed over like a bird's. His thin bat's voice was edged with anger.

"That's my business, McCreary."

"No!" The word came out, sharp as a whipcrack. "It's mine, too, Rubensohn. I want to know."

Janzoon's mouth dropped open. Lisette's eyes widened with astonishment. Rubensohn and McCreary faced each other, tense and unsmiling, across the table. Finally, Rubensohn spoke.

He measured out the words carefully, deliberately, like chips on a gambling-table. "You're a driller, McCreary. You are paid to make holes in the ground. The control of any enterprise belongs to the shareholders and directors. If you've any other ideas I'd like to hear them now."

"Fair enough, Rubensohn." McCreary's brogue was creamy as Irish butter. "I'll give 'em to you. You hired me as a driller. I do the job, you lay cash on the barrel-head. No questions asked. That was fine! But you set me up for something else that you didn't tell me about. The way I read it, I need a new contract."

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Do you want it here," asked McCreary gently, "or would you rather have it in private?"

"I want it here and now."

"Good! The man who negotiated your concession in Jakarta was Captain Raka. I don't know what documents he got you. I don't know how good they are, but I imagine they'll hold water till you get your deal signed up with the buyers and pull out. Raka tried to hoist the price, so you poisoned him. I walked him off the ship for you, and he died in my arms. I left him under a banyan tree about a mile from the dock. Last of all, my name was broadcast over Singapore radio as a probable suspect for his murder. I don't like that. I don't like looking down the barrel like a sitting duck. I think you should tear up my present contract and write me a new one."

Rubensohn's eyes never left McCreary's face. He said in a high whisper, "Get out, Lisette! Get out and stay on deck till I call for you."

She went out swiftly. McCreary held the door for her and closed it again behind her. When he turned back, he saw that Rubensohn held a gun.

The barrel was a black, unwinking eye, staring at his heart. Rubensohn was smiling bleakly.

"You're looking down the barrel now, McCreary. Death is very close to you. Have you anything else to say?"

McCreary grinned crookedly. He took out a cigarette, tapped it on his thumbnail, and lit it with Raka's lighter. He blew a cloud

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of smoke in Rubensohn's face and murmured, " Put it away, man, and let's get down to business. You made a mistake. Why not admit it, and let's make a new start."

" And if I don't? "

" Then you'll probably blow the back of my head off. But," he pointed down at the chart, " you'll have a long, long way to go to find a new driller."

Janzoon said thickly, " He's right, Rubensohn. Unless we want to upset the whole schedule, we need him. What do we lose if we talk? " Slowly the tension relaxed. Rubensohn laid the gun down on the table and eased himself into a chair.

" McCreary? " Rubensohn looked at him with blank, filmy eyes.

McCreary drew placidly on his cigarette, " The first thing I want is full information on the project, a sight of all concession documents, a look at all correspondence and cable messages. I won't work in the dark. Next, I want a share in whatever company exists to control the concession and its working."

" How much? " asked Rubensohn flatly.

" How much is Janzoon getting? "

" Twenty per cent."

" I'll take thirty," said McCreary genially. " That still leaves you in control, Rubensohn."

" Anything else? "

" Yes. I'll sit in on all sales negotiations and I'll take my cut from the sale by direct payment from the purchasers."

" And how do you expect to enforce your claims? "

McCreary shrugged and spread his hands in an eloquent gesture. " Simple enough. If you don't agree, you don't get your oil. If you welsh on me later, I'll tell the buyer a little story about a policeman who was bribed and afterwards murdered. He'll probably take the precaution of checking on your negotiations with the ministry in Jakarta. Then he'd find you had nothing to sell." He smiled at them amiably through the smoke. " I gather you'd rather not have that happen? "

Rubensohn's red mouth curled in a grudging smile.

" It's nice play, McCreary. But you forget one thing. You're outside the law. You're wanted for murder."

" So are you," said McCreary calmly. " Though it might take a little longer to prove."

" It's too much! " Janzoon exploded into guttural anger.

Rubensohn's peremptory voice cut him short. " McCreary is a good negotiator. He understands that one should always ask more than one is prepared to accept. Say twenty per cent, McCreary, and you're in business."

" Say twenty-five, and I'll forget the cruel damage to my reputation."

" No! " Janzoon's cropped head thrust angrily across the table.

" It's a deal," said Rubensohn. " They're my shares, Janzoon, not yours." Janzoon relapsed into hostile silence.

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" Do I get the information and the documents? "

Rubensohn nodded. " You can go through them at your leisure."

" And we'll put all this in writing? "

" Before we land on Karang Sharo, yes. Anything else? "

" No, I think that's all."

" Good," said Rubensohn briskly. " Now we can discuss what brought us here in the first place—what happens when we reach the island."

And while Rubensohn went on to discuss the coming operation, McCreary listened with only half his attention. The rest was absorbed with a curious and disturbing question: Why had Rubensohn handed a fortune on a silver plate to the man who had it in his power to destroy him? Even Janzoon didn't seem to know the answer to that one. For the rest of the meeting he scowled into his beard and said not a single word to McCreary.

Rubensohn, on the other hand, had much to say. His exposition was crisp, concise, and business-like, and McCreary was moved to reluctant admiration.

" First, we have our concession from the Indonesian Government. As McCreary astutely points out, this is a dubious document, prized out of a senior official on whom Captain Raka had an embarrassing dossier. It is however quite genuine, although I suspect that the ministry knows nothing of its existence and the man who issued it will be happy to forget it for a while and repudiate it when it is called in question. By which time, we shall have our profit in hand and can leave the legal problems to our successors. Our immediate problem is with the Sultan of Karang Sharo. As I told you, his authority is absolute in his own territory. The folk in Jakarta couldn't control him, even if they wanted to.

" The important thing is that he is a primitive despot. He must be approached with ceremony. We must come as strangers bringing tribute to the man whose title is ' Navel of the Universe.' We'll receive him on board, and be received by him in his palace. After the palaver, we hope to get from him a document under the palace seal, granting us a concession in his own name. Then, if we're lucky, we can start work."

" How long do you expect the junketings to last? "

" A day, or two days, no more. Then you can start unloading the stores. Among the documents I'll give you is a full list of equipment and supplies. I think you'll find there's all you want."

" I'm sure I shall," said McCreary, and he meant it as a compliment. " So we start work, and we hope to bring in a well. When does the buyer come in, and from where? "

" The buyer is Scott Morrison. Do you know him? "

McCreary whistled. Scott Morrison was a big name in independent oil business. He was a speculator, tabbing the operations of the small concessionaires. He had the best advice that money could buy, and the best nose in the business for a good field.

McCreary chuckled, and Rubensohn frowned with irritation.

" Something funny, McCreary? "

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"Yes. I've just thought of it. Morrison's a filibuster, too, isn't he? He's pulled a few fast ones of his own. I'll be interested to see how you make out."

"How we make out," Rubensohn corrected him sharply. "We're partners now, McCreary, remember?"

"Where's Morrison at the moment? When does he show up?"

"Cruising," said Rubensohn, "Tahiti, Bougainville, Noumea, Sydney. Then he's pulling in to New Guinea. We can expect him at Karang Sharo about six weeks from now. If we need him sooner, we can send a radio. He insists on a personal inspection. That's why we must have something to show him."

McCreary grinned. "He's a wise man. If I were in his shoes I'd do the same. Do you think he'll take your Jakarta papers at their face value?"

"Give him a smell of oil and he'd take them written on toilet paper. Besides, the mere fact that we're working openly will be proof enough of good faith. All the same," Rubensohn's full mouth smiled with sardonic satisfaction, "I'd give a lot to see his face when the Indonesian Government orders him off the island."

"You sound as though you don't like him."

"I've done business with him before," said Rubensohn grimly. "Ten years ago, when I was battling for a stake, he turned me out of his office. I've waited a long time to settle the score, but now, I think, we may do it. It depends on you, McCreary."

"I'm glad you said that," murmured McCreary, "it makes me feel better."

Rubensohn looked at him with cool and speculative eyes. He picked up the gun from the table and held it a moment slackly in his hands. His tone was elaborately casual.

"You play a nice hand, McCreary. I don't grudge you the jackpot. But don't bid too high. It can be dangerous."

McCreary shrugged casually. "I'm a modest man, Rubensohn. I'm content with a cosy game. So long as it stays that way."

But all the time the black Irish devils were chuckling inside him and he thought, If only you knew, Rubensohn, just how high I am bidding!

The next two hours McCreary spent in his cabin, wading through the documents and correspondence which Rubensohn had dumped contemptuously in his lap.

What interested him first of all was the fact that none of the correspondence had been signed by Rubensohn. All of it was franked by a certain João da Silva, Managing Director of South East Asia Mineral Research Limited, whose registered address was in Singapore. Rubensohn had been thoughtful enough to include a copy of the memorandum and articles of this company, which showed that it had been incorporated in Singapore twelve months previously, and that its directors were John Mortimer Stavey, Wilhelm Kornelis Janzoon, and João da Silva, each of whom held one share of an authorized capital of £50,000 sterling.

The next document was more revealing as to the measure of

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Rubensohn's confidence, and as evidence of his need for a quick settlement. It was a bill of sale with South East Asia Mineral Research as the Vendor and Scott Morrison Enterprises Incorporated as the Purchaser. It provided for the outright sale of the Karang Sharo oil concession, together with all plant scheduled at the time of signature. Space had been left on all copies for the insertion of monetary figures and both the document and the spaces for additions had been signed for the company by João da Silva and witnessed by Elisabeth Mary Gonzalez.

There was also a blank space for a second director's signature on the day of completion, and this, he saw with interest, would be Janzoon and not Rubensohn. The most significant clause in the agreement was the final one. That the sale should become effective on the cabled notification that the purchaser's cheque had been deposited and cleared to the account of the Vendor with the Chase Manhattan Bank in New York.

Once the figures had been agreed, the whole deal could be concluded on the spot and radio messages could be sent off to New York for confirmation and payment.

When that was done, Rubensohn could up-anchor and head to sea, richer by several million dollars, leaving Morrison and his lawyers a ten-year battle with the intricacies of international law and the liabilities of corporate bodies registered in foreign territories. Even then, it would be the signatories who would take the rap, not Rubensohn himself.

The final document, the concession granted by the Republic of Indonesia to the Singapore Company, was a fifteen-page opus in Malay, with a certified translation in English, bound in manila and stamped with the massive seal of the Republic, the symbolic Garuda bird, with seventeen feathers in its spreading wings and eight in its splay-tail.

There was no doubt as to the authenticity of the document itself. The real problem lay in its origins and in the signatures at the foot. Any official with access to files could draw a credible contract, scrawl in the necessary signatures, and append the Government seal. But if he lacked the authority, the signatures and the seals were of no value to anyone but himself. The man to whom he sold it was risking his whole enterprise on a scrap of worthless paper.

McCreary smiled with sour admiration at Rubensohn's audacity and astuteness. The man was a filibuster all right—amoral, fearless. Like so many of his fellows, he stood even chances of ending up with a bullet in his back, or with an art collection and a reputation for philanthropy.

Until the well was brought in, McCreary himself was safe, because he was necessary. Afterwards? He would be not only unnecessary, but an active danger to Rubensohn and a pointless charge against the profits. He would be alone, on an island. His only link with the outside world would be Rubensohn's own ship. His only friends . . . Then he remembered that he had no friends.

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He was rootless as a Galway tinker with no one to care a damn whether he lived or died.

He was still chewing on that sour truth when the door of his cabin opened and Lisette came in.

She closed the door carefully and locked it. Then she came to him swiftly and stood over the bunk. Her face was ashen, her hands trembling, and her voice shook with fear and anger as she blazed at him, "Why did you do it, McCreary? No matter what had happened, no matter what you knew, why couldn't you keep it to yourself? Don't you know he'll never forgive you? Dear God in heaven!" Her eyes filled up with tears of impotent anger. "Is there no end to your follies? Don't you know yet what sort of man he is? He may fill your pockets with diamonds, but he'll never forgive you. He'll wait and wait—and one day he'll put a knife in your ribs and twist it till you scream for mercy. But there won't be any mercy. Why didn't you listen to me? Why? Why?"

"Holy Patrick!" McCreary swore softly. "Then you do care! God help me for a bog-trotting clown! You care!" He heaved himself up on the bed and caught her in his arms and she clung to him desperately. He felt her body against him shaken with deep, racking sobs. He held her close to him, his lips brushing her hair, coaxing her like a child in his soft, blarneying voice.

"Come now, sweetheart! Have your cry if it helps, but let's not make an elephant out of a fat toad like Rubensohn. There's nothing he can do to us, if we've got guts enough to face him."

The words were hardly out of his mouth before she thrust him away again in tearful fury. "Don't talk like that! I tell you, you don't know him as I do. Look!" She unbuttoned the high-necked Chinese frock and slipped it back from her shoulders.

With a shock of disgust, McCreary saw that her back and her breasts were criss-crossed with thin, angry weals.

"He did that to me last night. He laughed while he did it. He told me it was to teach me that my body was for his pleasure, not for other men to gape at on the deck. Now can you see what sort of man he is? Can you?"

For a long moment McCreary looked at her with pity and tenderness. Then his belly knotted and anger rose in his throat like bile. His eyes hardened and his crooked mouth was tight as a trap. Very gently, he bent and kissed her shoulders. Then he made her sit down on the bunk while he talked to her, softly, deliberately, in a voice she had never heard before.

"I'm going to take him, Lisette. Not now, not yet, because here, on this ship, I'm as helpless as you are. So I'll smile with him and eat with him and drink with him and let him dream of all the things he's going to do to me after I've served my uses. Then, one day, I'll take him. I'll strip him down, stitch by stitch, till there's nothing left but his yellow soul and his white slug's body. Then I'll kill him for you."

She looked at him with a kind of forlorn tenderness and shook her head.

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" You can't, McCreary. Others have tried and they've all ended the same way. He wears his money and his power like armour. He's too big to touch. He'll kill you before you can get within reach of him."

McCreary gave her a sombre, lopsided smile.

" You don't understand the Irish, sweetheart. They're an old dark people, with amazing powers of survival. A man like Rubensohn they can eat for breakfast and still be hungry for bacon and eggs."

He lifted her to her feet and kissed her again, long and passionately, and then sent her to wash the tears off her face so that she could greet Rubensohn when he sent for her.

When she came back, her face was the same dead mask that she had shown him the first day they met, but her eyes were warm to him and grateful.

He opened the door to see that the passage was clear, then he beckoned her out swiftly and watched her go, a small defiant figure with stripes across her shoulders and the wounds of the world on her heart. Her perfume still lingered in the cabin and on his clothes, but he paid no heed to it. He lay on the bed with Captain Raka's lighter in his hands and thought about killing Rubensohn.

Early after lunch, when all but the duty watch had retired to sleep away the worst of the heat, he climbed to the wireless cabin to talk with Guido whom he had come to trust as his only friend on board. He found the little Neapolitan stripped to his underdrawers, propped on his bunk, with a glass of beer at his elbow, a cigarette in his mouth and a gaudy magazine, full of lovelies, propped on his knees.

He greeted McCreary with a flashing smile and a theatrical gesture of welcome. " Come in, amico. Get yourself a beer! Sit down and share my women. They're all I have just now, but you're welcome to them."

" Thanks, Guido," said McCreary warmly. Then he told him everything from the beginning in Pakanbaroe to the last hour in his cabin with Lisette. He told him what he wanted to do, and how the odds were stacked against his doing it. When he had finished, Guido's face was clouded with anger and his dark eyes were sombre. " You are in worse trouble than I thought. Anything you want, I do, you know that."

" There's nothing you can do yet, Guido. Just keep an eye on the radio traffic and let me know what goes through. When we get to Karang Sharo, I'll be working. But I want you to keep in touch with me, and keep an eye on Lisette. I'll tell her about you, when I get a chance. I only wish I had a gun."

Guido brightened immediately. " I got a gun, amico. I have not used it since the war, but I always carry it—in case I meet the wrong girl in the wrong house, eh? "

He slid off the bunk and fished in a battered suitcase to come up with a stubby automatic and two clips of ammunition. The gun

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was carefully oiled. McCreary tested the action, shoved a shell into the breech, and slipped on the safety catch. Then he put the gun into his trouser pocket.

His eyes were bright with gratitude.

"Thanks, Guido. I won't forget this. And when we've taken our profit from Rubensohn's hide, you get your cut, too."

Guido shrugged. "Forget the profit. Look after yourself and the girl." His face brightened into a grin of happy lechery and he thumped McCreary on the chest. "It shows, amico! You can never guess. A cold one like that, and suddenly she is on fire like brandy on a bombe!"

McCreary felt better. The odds against him had shortened a little. He had allies now, Guido and Lisette, and when he shoved his hand into his pocket, the gun lay hard and comforting against his palm.

The night before they raised the island of Karang Sharo, Rubensohn called a conference of his staff. McCreary was there, and Lisette, with Captain Janzoon and the ship's officers.

He plunged briskly into business. "Tomorrow, gentlemen, we make our landfall—Karang Sharo. We expect to spend some time there, six weeks, eight weeks possibly. We have fifty tons of supplies to unload: some of these will be transported in our own lifeboats, the rest will be taken ashore on pontoon rafts which will be ready for us on our arrival."

McCreary looked up sharply. It was the first he had heard of a Rubensohn representative on the island itself. Rubensohn caught his quick, inquiring glance and smiled obliquely.

"A question, Mr. McCreary!"

"No, no!" McCreary waved aside the irony. "I've been asking myself how you were to get a couple of generators, pumping-gear, and two thousand feet of casing onto the beach."

"We have someone organizing that for us," said Rubensohn. "His name is Pedro Miranha. He's a half-caste Portuguese from Timor, married to a local girl. He runs a trading-post of sorts on Karang Sharo. He speaks the local dialect and some English and stands well with the Palace authorities. I've arranged for him to act as interpreter, and to negotiate and recruit local labour. If you, McCreary, or the rest of you have problems, take them to him.

"Some of you have visited the island before. You know that the people are mixed migrant stock, from Bali and Lombok, from Sulawesi and from Ceram. The women are beautiful and the men temperamental. You know also that any—er—arrangements for your comfort are best made through Miranha. No women will be allowed on board. We are running a ship, not a brothel."

Rubensohn's high voice took up again. "Our first job is to get the stores ashore and a work camp set up on McCreary's drilling-site. Our next is to get the derrick erected and the motor and generators installed and store-houses built."

"The installation's the biggest part," said McCreary. "Once

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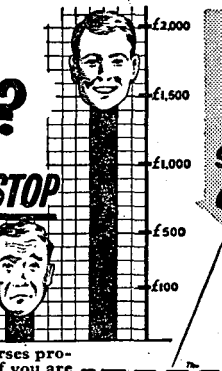

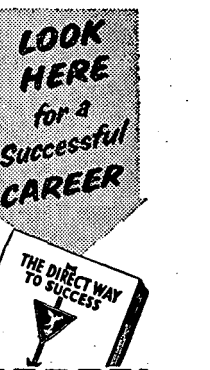

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I LITTLE thought when I arrived at my friend Borg's house that I was about to see something truly extraordinary, and to increase my mental powers tenfold.

He had asked me to come to Stockholm to lecture to the Swedes about Lister and other British scientists. On the evening of my arrival, after the champagne, our conversation turned naturally to the problems of public speaking and to the great labour imposed on us lecturers by the need to be word perfect in our lectures.

Borg then told me that his power of memory would probably amaze me—and I had known him, while we were studying law together in Paris to have the most deplorable memory !

So he went to the end of the dining room and asked me to write down a hundred three-figure numbers, calling each one out in a clear voice. When I had filled the edge of an old newspaper with figures, *Borg repeated them to me in the order in which I had written them down and then in reverse order, that is beginning with the last number. He also allowed me to ask him the relative position of different numbers : for example, which was the 24th, the 72nd, and the 38th, and I noticed that he replied to all my questions at once and without effort, as if the figures which I had written on the paper had been also written in his brain.*

I was dumbfounded by such a feat and sought in vain for the trick which enabled him to achieve it. My friend then said : " The thing you have just seen and which seems so remarkable is, in fact, quite simple ; everybody has a memory good enough to do the same, but few indeed can use this wonderful faculty."

He then revealed to me how I could achieve a similar feat of memory, and I at once mastered the secret—without mistakes and without effort—as you too will master it tomorrow.

But I did not stop at these amusing experiments. I applied the principles I had learned in my daily work. I could now remember, with unbelievable facility, the lectures I heard and those which I gave myself, the names of people I met—even if it was only once—as well as their addresses, and a thousand other details which were most useful to me. *Finally, I discovered after a while that not only had my memory improved, but that I had also acquired greater powers of concentration ; a surer judgment —which is by no means surprising since the keenness of our intellect is primarily dependent on the number and variety of the things we remember.*

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the stuff is running, it's only normal maintenance—barring accidents, of course. At the beginning, I shall stay ashore. After that I come visiting. How far is this camp from the beach?"

"Three miles," said Rubensohn.

"A damn nuisance without transport," said McCreary. "Every time I want something from the ship, I have to send a runner."

"Maybe I can help," said Guido.

McCreary looked across at him and caught his flashing smile and the faint suggestion of a wink.

"How?" asked Rubensohn.

"I have two emergency transceiver packs. One of those we can set up on board for me or for the officer of the watch. If McCreary wants anything, he calls up the ship and we organize it. Presto!"

"Fine!" said McCreary with enthusiasm. It gave him a link with Guido, and a link with Lisette. It wasn't so important now, but later his life might depend on it.

Rubensohn nodded agreement and passed briskly to the next part of the agenda. "Formalities, gentlemen. Our estimated time of arrival is 1000 hours tomorrow morning. We expect to receive the Sultan and his retinue on board at midday." He grinned at them sardonically. "This is only the beginning. There is the night to be got through as well. I want no incidents until I've completed certain business with the Navel of the Universe. In the evening, I understand, we'll be received in the Palace. Officers only—but each man will choose one of the crew to attend him as personal servant. I'd like to make an impressive showing." Rubensohn signalled to the steward to bring out champagne. They toasted the enterprise and toasted one another. Then, after a while, Rubensohn and Lisette went below and the rest of them dispersed.

McCreary walked over to the starboard rail and lit a cigarette. The moon had not yet risen and the ship was a small moving island of light in a dark sea.

There was a footfall behind him, and a moment later Captain Janzoon's burly figure was propped on the rail at his side. "A nice night, my friend. You should feel very pleased with yourself. The big play, the big profit. You cut yourself in for a lot of money."

"If I don't bring in a well," said McCreary coolly, "there's no money in it for anybody."

Janzoon gave him a quick, sidelong glance.

"Perhaps you'd like to lay off some of the—the risks."

McCreary shrugged with apparent indifference. "What's the risk for me? Only time and effort. They cost me nothing."

"There's your life," said Janzoon softly. "And the girl's."

McCreary held tightly on to the rail and stared out to sea. The knives were out again, pricking round his ribs. At the first flicker of doubt or fear, they would slide in, up to the hilt.

"Listen, McCreary! I'm trying to tell you something. There are three of us in this deal: Rubensohn, me, and you. Rubensohn's the big one, but you and me together, we are pretty big, too. You see? We should be allies, not enemies."

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McCreary slewed round sharply to face him. His voice was low, but tight and cold. "You've given me this before, Janzoon. I don't like card games with five aces in the pack. If you've got a proposition, let's hear it—all of it. It'd better be good because at this moment you need me much more than I need you!"

Janzoon grinned at him behind the thick spade beard. His eyes twinkled maliciously.

"Good! I show you what I hold—three aces!"

"Let's see 'em."

"First, you have a yen for Rubensohn's girl."

McCreary shrugged. "That's not an ace, Janzoon, that's a deuce."

Janzoon spread his hands in a wide gesture of disbelief.

"You want her. If Rubensohn hears it, he will kill her first and then you. So it comes out an ace anyway, McCreary—the ace of hearts."

"Go on!" McCreary's voice was bleak.

"The next one is the ace of diamonds." Janzoon was enjoying the metaphor. "You asked for thirty per cent. You make what you think is a clever condition. Your share of the money must be paid to you direct. Rubensohn agrees to that, too. You think you have touched the horn of plenty. You bloody fool!" Janzoon's grin changed to a crooked sneer. "You don't touch that money till Scott Morrison comes. And Rubensohn doesn't send for him till the well blows in. Before he comes, you are dead! No pockets in a winding-sheet, McCreary. But I can keep you alive—at a price."

"We'll come to the price in a minute," said McCreary easily. "I'm interested in the last ace of yours."

"The ace of spades," said Janzoon. "The grave-digger. You read the documents? You read the bill of sale? And the articles of association of the company?

"You see that Rubensohn's name does not appear there?"

"I thought that was very clever of him," said McCreary tartly. "He takes the money, but he doesn't take the risk. You're liable for any action that's brought in this part of the world because your name's on the Singapore registration."

Janzoon looked at him in swift surprise. "But did you reason to the next step? Rubensohn's signature is not necessary to the sale. If there are any alterations necessary to the drawn document I can countersign them under the articles. So maybe it's better if we both stay alive and Rubensohn dies, eh?"

"Holy Patrick!" McCreary swore softly. "That's one I hadn't thought of!"

Janzoon chuckled. "It makes a nice hand, eh, McCreary? You got any cards to beat it?"

"Depends on which way you want to play it," said McCreary.

"What do you mean?"

"There's three ways, Janzoon. Take your pick. First, I can sit back and bid against you on the strength I hold, and you're still

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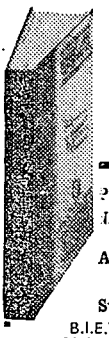

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not quite sure what that is. Otherwise you wouldn't be here now. Next, you can buy me out of the game altogether. Cash on the nail here and now. Last of all, we play together and against Rubensohn and split the stake fifty-fifty. But understand something . . ." McCreary faced him squarely. His lean jaw was set, his eyes bright with challenge.

" I won't be threatened, I can't be scared. I can gamble my life with a free conscience. I don't care, you see? I'd like to come out of it with a whole skin and a nice profit, but if I can't, then by the living harry, I'll give you both a hot run for your money! Does that make it plain?"

Janzoon looked at him with sober, speculative eyes.

" Very plain. I think I can make you an offer that will attract you. But I like to think about it first, eh? "

" Does that mean *you'll* think about it—or Rubensohn? "

" In heaven's name, no! " For the first time, there was real fear in Janzoon's voice. He laid a big hand on McCreary's arm and his fingers bit desperately into the flesh. " At the beginning, sure! I sound you out for Rubensohn. But this—no! This is a private thing. I know how close we sail to the wind. I am not happy about it. I want the profit, but I want the risks better than they are for me. If Rubensohn knew . . ."

" He won't," said McCreary curtly. " So long as you play straight with me. And another thing. Where is Scott Morrison now? "

Janzoon cast a quick, scared glance around the deserted deck. " He's in Darwin Harbour, waiting for word from us." After a while, Janzoon said uneasily, " I think we can do business, McCreary. But there are promises I can't make."

" Such as? "

" The girl. How important is she to you? "

" Why? "

" Because—" Janzoon fumbled awkwardly for a phrase—" I don't want to spoil our business because of what Rubensohn has in mind for her future."

" For God's sake, Janzoon! " McCreary's voice was edgy. " Out with it, man! What are you trying to tell me? "

Janzoon gestured wearily. " I try to tell you that if you want to save her, you fight Rubensohn, not me. For the rest, I think over terms, and make you an offer. Yes? "

" Take your time," said McCreary. But when he was alone again, his face grew sombre.

Janzoon he could handle, playing on his greed and his fear of Rubensohn. But Lisette in danger was a different matter. He knew now that he was in love with her, and this unknown threat to her was a knife held at his own throat.

★ ***The last part of " McCreary's Luck," by Michael East, appears in next month's Argosy on sale January 10***

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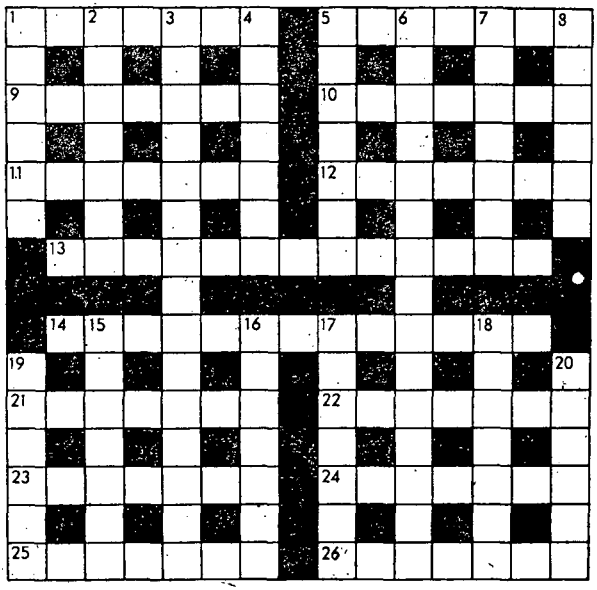
ARGOSY CROSS-WORD

★

Solution on Page 82



★

CLUES

Across

1 Bird swallows an ant ; comes to a pretty end (3-4).

5 Drink wine, it'll keep you up (7).

9 Father of Mirth, perhaps, said Milton (7).

10 Hybrid in women's services—they're charming ! (7).

11 It rules, upset but stronger (7).

12 Change Eve, pard, and you corrupt her (7).

13 Stage Mum is no lady (9, 4).

14 After the doves in that pear tree (3, 1, 9).

21 Swooped and transferred a design (7).

22 The C.O., a gent, is somewhat akin (7).

23 Show in—whom ? Ourselves and a girl (5, 2).

24 First letter often ends a note (7).

25 Ballet gives some the Wilis ? (7).

26 Goose is a grubby convict (7).

Down

1 Begin the bone with a white lie (6).

2 So Ian, in charge, muddles through the Cypriot town (7).

3 Dickens's story's a song (1, 9, 5).

4 Five years' desire for a drink (7).

5 Actresses need astronomical figures for this ! (7).

6 Jack Horner's definition of Christmas ? (4-7, 4).

7 Bowl, not necessarily flowing (7).

8 Will he try anything for a shilling ? (6).

15 Nothing's teamed with crosses (7).

16 Before behind and goes slowly (7).

17 Clockwork mattress-cover ? (7).

18 Age of the iceman, obviously (7).

19 " Vile dust, from whence he ——" (Scott) (6).

20 A bad sailor hasn't one to stand on (3-3).

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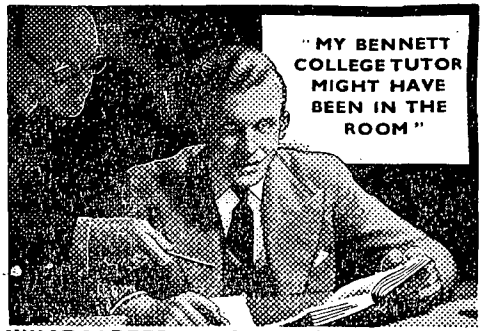

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